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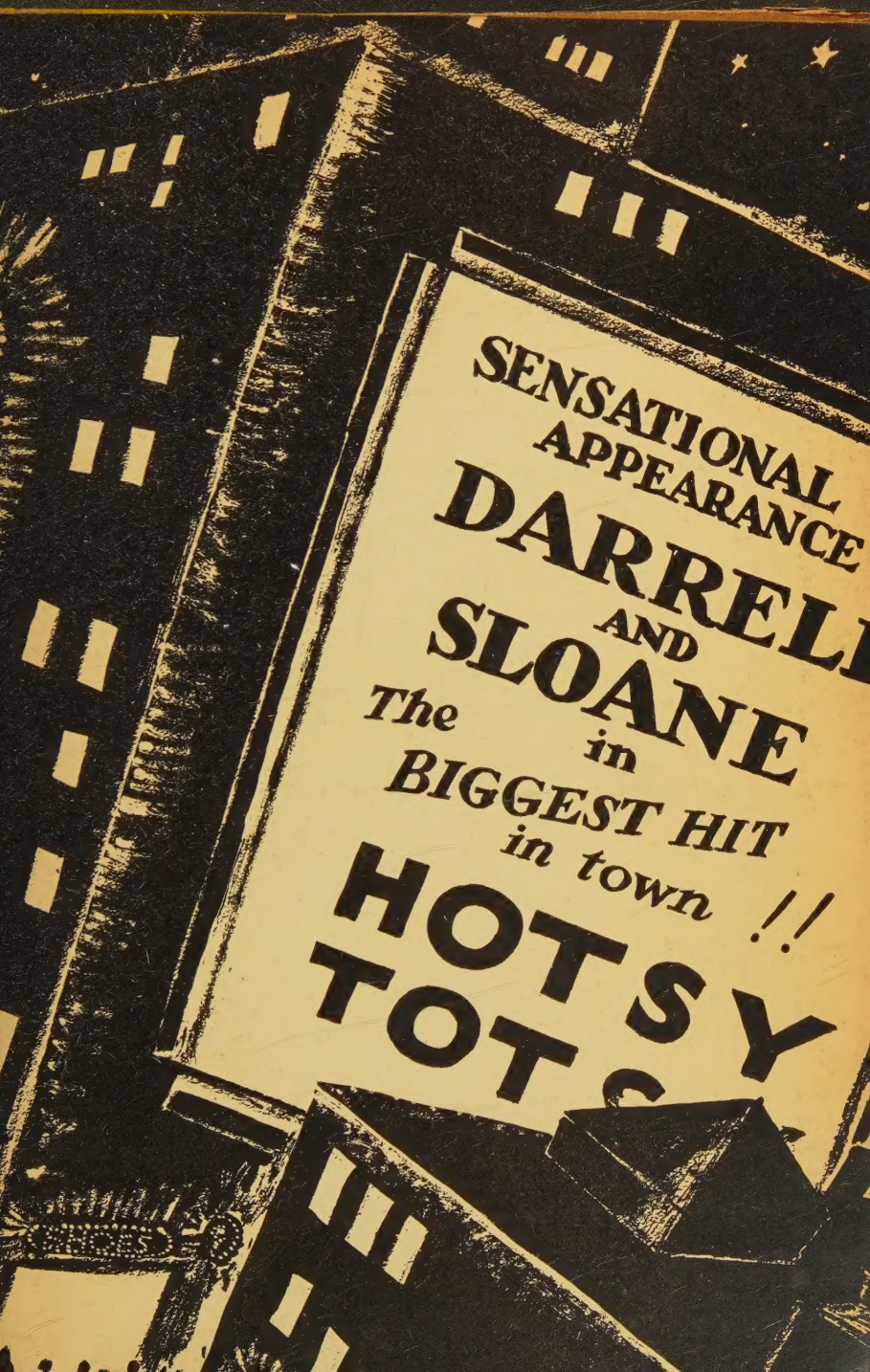
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Stepping High

By Gene Markey

STEPPING HIGH
LITERARY LIGHTS
MEN ABOUT TOWN

With Charles Collins
THE DARK ISLAND

Plays
RIGHT YOU ARE

With Samuel Hoffenstein
THE ESKIMO

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D

Stepping High

by Gene Markey

Illustrated by
JAY

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN
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FIRST EDITION

To

Samuel Hoffenstein

Chapter 1

IT WAS the "parlor" of a suite in one of those theatrical hotels in the West Forties, just off Broadway. The one window looked out upon a bleak court, and opposite on the wall hung a large framed photograph of the Colosseum by Moonlight. Scattered around the room were several stiff pieces of hotel furniture, and in the center of the floor stood

a battered trunk, on which was painted in white letters:

DARRELL AND SLOANE
HOTEL

A loud knock at the door leading to the hall. Silence. The knocking repeated. Then Flo Sloane came out of the bedroom, clutching a frilly blue kimono about her as she hurried to the door. Flo was young, and, even at this hour in the morning, extremely pretty. She moved with the grace of a dancer, and beside her scampered a cinnamon-colored bull pup: the sort of dog that vaudeville couples invariably possess.

Cautiously Flo opened the door. A gray-uniformed bellboy stood there, holding an armful of newspapers.

"G'morning," he greeted her. "Here's the papers you ordered."

"Thank you." Flo took them eagerly.

"I couldn't get the *Graphic*. They was all sold out downstairs. Want me to go down to the corner an' get one?"

"Oh, yes—sure, we want them all." Flo

sat down, hastily opening the paper on top of the heap.

"O. K." The bellboy, who was middle-aged and somewhat bald, appeared to be in no hurry. "Hello, Salomy." He reached down and patted the dog. "'S a swell day out, Miss Sloane—er—Mrs. Darrell. Excuse me—I git used t' usin' people's profeshnal names here in the hotel."

"Yes?" Flo was not listening.

"Well"— he leaned comfortably against the door—"I hope your show got over las' night."

"Thank you." Flo's blue eyes were anxiously searching for the theatrical page.

"How's the notices?" inquired the bellboy conversationally.

So occupied was she in reading that she did not hear him.

"Well," he remarked, possibly in soliloquy. "I'll go down t' the corner an' getcha a *Graphic*." Leisurely he went out, closing the door after him.

With the practised eye of the professional,

Flo scanned the half-column review, seeking her own name. It was not there.

"Not even a mention!" She flung down the paper and quickly opened another.

From the bedroom came a pleasant, if plaintive, masculine voice: "Hey, Mamma —I can't find my slippers!"

Flo's attention was focused on the page in front of her. She did not look up.

"They ain't here," continued the voice from the bedroom. "Hey, Mamma—where did I put 'em?"

To herself in a whisper, Flo was reading:

"'Just another of those musical comedies intended to lighten the burden of the tired business man. But it is our opinion that the tired business man could sleep more comfortably at home——'"

Abruptly she tossed aside the paper, and opened the next one.

"There's nothin' like slippers for gettin' lost on ya. They're worse'n collar buttons," went on the voice from the bedroom. "An' I had a big offer for them slippers from an antique dealer!"

As Flo finished reading the third review she crumpled the paper with an expression of chagrin and disappointment and, rising, walked to the window. For a few seconds she stood staring out upon the bleak court, then brushed a tear from her eye.

"I found 'em, Mamma! Where'd ya think they were?" Benny Darrell, in an ornate green dressing gown that could only have come from a Broadway haberdasher, emerged from the bedroom. His dark hair was tousled, and upon his lean, attractive face glowed a cheerful smile.

"Well, how about it, Baby?" He eyed the crumpled pile of newspapers. "I guess we're a hit—eh?"

"Yes?" Flo was staring moodily out the window. "*You* read 'em!"

"Who—*me?*" Benny picked up one unopened paper, turned to the theatrical page, and sat down. "I don't have to read 'em—I *know* we're good."

His eye, following his finger, ran down the column to locate their names. Of a sudden he began to read aloud:

"'Darrell an' Sloane, a clever dancing team——' hey, Mamma, listen t' this! 'Darrell an' Sloane, *a clever dancing team*, furnished the one bright spot of the evening.' Say!" he exclaimed. "This is great! And wait—there's more! 'Or perhaps they only seemed bright by contrast with the rest of this gloomy extravaganza. . . .'" As he read the last words his smile faded.

"Yes—" Flo was scornful—"that's great!"

"Oh, well, nobody reads the papers, anyhow."

He stood up. "How are the other notices, Baby? My eyes hurt."

And without turning his wife answered in a dull voice: "We're a flop."

"Don't ya believe it!" he declared cheerfully. "In the first place, these critics don't know a good dance act when they see one. In the second place, if ya know ya're good—ya're good. An' in the third place—how about breakfast?"

"I suppose"—Flo's voice was tearful—"you could sit there and eat!"

"Who—me?" He grinned. "I could sit anywhere an' eat. Why, many's the time I used t' take it on the hoof—right off the counter. A sandwich, some pie, a piece of cheese——"

"A piece of cheese—that's *your* cue!" flared Flo.

"Why, what's the matter, Baby?" He looked at her, surprised. "Y' ain't losin' your temper, are ya?"

"That's all I've ever had to lose, with you!"

"Now, wait a minute——"

Flo turned on him angrily. "You've been telling me to wait a minute for the last three years, while we were doing three shows a day on the Tri-State Circuit. 'Wait till we get on Broadway,' you always said. 'Wait till we get on Broadway, and we'll knock 'em cold.' Well, here we are on Broadway" — she pointed with a Lady Macbeth gesture toward the crumpled newspapers— "and we couldn't even knock the guys cold that didn't have to pay for their seats!"

'They didn't pan us, Mamma—they just

didn't mention us. That shows they couldn't make up their minds."

"I s'pose they'll telephone us as soon as they've decided!" She paced back and forth across the worn carpet, and her pretty features were dark with bitterness. "Three years of vaudeville, and then our 'big chance on Broadway'—one number in a bum musical show that won't last a week! And now, back to the sticks for us. Well—not for me. If you think I'm going to spend the rest of my life as a three-a-day hoofer with a three-a-day crowd, you're wrong."

Benny's expression was worried. "Whatta ya want to do, Honey?"

"I want to branch out," she cried, with more passion than petulance. "I want to see other places besides Topeka and Bloomington and Newark. I've been living in a suitcase ever since I married you."

"Well, I carried it, didn't I?"

"Listen, if I hadn't married *you*——"

Benny lifted a defensive hand. "I know the answer!"

"I wasn't made for this kind of a life."

Her blue eyes were sullen. "I'm ambitious. I've got the face and the figure to *be* somebody. And I'm going to be—before I end up in a wardrobe trunk on the Pantages Circuit!"

"Well, it's a roof over your head, anyhow, Baby." He grinned feebly. This sudden attack had upset him. It wasn't like Flo. Of course they had had little domestic tiffs in the three years of their nomadic married life, but nothing like this.

She turned away now, with a shrug of annoyance. "Oh, what's the use of talking to you! You belong where you are. Look at your friends—Lew Lewis, a cheap song writer——"

"Lew's all right," defended Benny loyally.

"You expect me to waste my life listening to his wisecracks—and trying to be polite to that dumb blonde cabaret singer that trails around after him——"

"Blondes don't hafta be bright."

"No—you're satisfied with those kind of people. You've got no imagination. You

don't try to get up in the world. You're a great help to a woman who wants to *be* somebody!"

And very quietly Benny said: "I taught ya to dance, didn't I?"

"Oh, I don't know! I wasn't so bad before I met you."

"Well, ya wasn't so good, either."

"Maybe you *can* dance," she admitted, "but what's it getting you?"

"The trouble with you, Honey"—he smiled patiently—"ya ain't had any breakfast."

"I don't want any breakfast."

"Oh, eat it, Baby—you'll like it."

"Well, where *is* it?"

"I dunno where they keep it till ya order it." He picked up the telephone. "Grapefruit, eh, Mamma?"

"Isn't there ever anything but *grapefruit* for breakfast?" murmured Flo wearily.

"I think I'll try prunes for a change. Hello," he called into the telephone. "Breakfast for two in suite 710. One grapefruit, one stewed prunes—wait a minute——" He

turned solicitously to Flo. "How about some oatmeal, Honey?"

Flo rewarded him with a dark look.

He put up a defensive hand. "All right." Then into the telephone: "No oatmeal. Fry two, an' turn 'em over. . . . Yeh—all the way over—they're eggs! Wait a minute." To Flo: "How about a lamb chop?"

"I don't eat them in the morning," she answered crossly, "and you know it."

"No lamb chop," said Benny into the telephone.

"I'll have some coffee and toast." She sighed, as if the very thought of food were distasteful to her.

"Didja hear that?" said Benny into the telephone. "Coffee *and* . . . And *what?* Whatta ya think? Toast. . . . O. K. An' get it up some time before dinner, will ya? Thanks." He put down the telephone, and turned to her with his cheeriest smile.

"Ya see, Baby, how a little breakfast changes everything?" Then, with a valiant effort to revive her drooping spirits, he continued: "I remember one time—before I

met you—I was playin' one of them overnight towns in Oklahoma, an' the hotel an' all the boardin' houses was full up. It was county fair week! Couldn't get a room nowheres, not even a boardin' house. I thought I'd have to sleep in the dressin' room—but it wasn't big enough to lay down in. So the manager of the theayter sends me over to the sheriff, an' whatta ya think the big bozo offers me? A cell, Mamma. Would ya believe it? A cell in the hoosegow!"

"And why not?"

"Well, I took it—see," went on Benny, undaunted, "an' all night I'm layin' there thinkin', 'Well, here y'are at last, kid—an' there's a lot of worse guys outside!' An' when I get up in the mornin', whatta ya think this egg of a sheriff does? He charges me one buck for room rent. Can y'imagine how I felt when I got outa that dump? Well, Mamma—believe it or not—I goes an' gets myself some breakfast, see, an' everything is——" He finished with an expansive gesture expressing complete satisfaction.

"And what's all this leading to?" inquired Flo coldly.

"I'm just tryin' to point out to ya, Honey, that breakfast is a big thing when y'ain't feelin'——"

"Oh, turn it off!" snapped Flo. "I've been hearing this ragtime for three years!"

"All right, Baby!" He was still cheerful.

"Have you figured out how you're going to pay the hotel bill? You went ahead and took a suite here on the strength of our—Broadway engagement, didn't you?"

"But I thought——"

"You thought! With what? I never knew you to think since the day I married you."

"I couldn't of been thinkin' *that* day!"

"Here we've been rehearsing five weeks—spending our last nickel—and now all we get out of it is two weeks' salary—and lucky to get it. And you stand there giving me a ballyhoo about breakfast!"

"Well, what's the matter with breakfast?" He smiled with undimmed good nature.

A knock at the hall door.

"And there it is!" he exclaimed. "Right on the cue! *Come in.*"

The door opened, and a tall, spare, stooped young man with a doleful countenance, wearing a green suit and a cap, stood there.

"Hello, Lew!" called Benny, eagerly welcoming this interruption. "I thought you was breakfast."

"Wrong," observed the young man in a hollow voice. Hands in pockets, he sauntered indolently into the room, kicking the door shut after him. Salomy, the bull pup, sniffed at his heels suspiciously.

Along Broadway Lew Lewis was celebrated as a song writer and curbstone comedian. His humor took the form of satire and irony, spoken from the depths of a pessimistic soul. He had never been known to smile, and he seldom removed his cap, unless dining with a lady in a public restaurant.

"Well," began Benny cheerfully, "how'd ya like the show?"

Mr. Lewis made an indelicate gesture of holding his nose.

"As bad as that?" said Benny.

"I give it a week at the most."

"But the notices wasn't so bad," persisted Benny.

"Wrong again."

"Oh, what's the use of talking to Benny!" Flo turned away.

"She acts as if *I* wrote the show!" Benny grinned. "Had any breakfast, Lew?"

"*I* have." Lew nodded toward Flo. "*She* ain't."

"That's just what I been tellin' her. She'll feel better when——" He saw Flo start toward the bedroom. "Where ya goin', Baby?"

"To Palm Beach!" And she went out, slamming the door.

Benny stared after her, bewildered. Mr. Lewis, with the look of a man who expects that sort of thing from women, sat down and languidly lighted a cigarette.

"She thinks the show's a bust," confided Benny.

"She's clever."

"I dunno what's wrong with 'er." Benny's

cheerfulness had evaporated. "She's talkin' like she was sick of me."

"Yeh?"

Benny resented his friend's cynicism. "Well, Flo's diff'rent——"

"They all are," said Mr. Lewis.

"Whatta ya mean, they all are?"

The philosopher of Tin Pan Alley merely exhaled a smoke ring and watched it with mild interest.

"Gee," continued Benny, "ya gotta expect a bad break now an' then. The biggest artists in the profession gets 'em. Look at De Wolf Hopper—married six times. What's the use of gettin' discouraged?"

"Why not?"

"The show got off to a bad start las' night. But lots of shows get panned—an' run a year. Look at——"

"Don't say *Abie's Irish Rose.*"

"I'm sayin' we're good, Flo an' me. One show don't make ya or break ya."

"One broke *me,*" sighed Mr. Lewis, recalling an ill-fated venture as a producer.

"Listen, Lew," demanded Benny very

gravely, "dontcha think we're a good dance team?"

"I dunno about the team. The little woman acts like she was ready t' kick out of the harness."

"Ya don't really think so, Lew?"

"I was wrong once."

"Well"—Benny clutched at his old optimism—"this is twice! All that's the matter with Flo is she ain't had any breakfast."

This strained moment was relieved by the entrance of an elderly and flat-footed waiter carrying a tray of breakfast things.

"Where ya been?" Benny greeted him.

"I don't cook it," wheezed the waiter gloomily.

"Lucky for us." Benny was making a new show of cheerfulness. "Hey, Mamma!" he called. "Here it is!"

With leisurely and ponderous movements the flat-footed waiter laid a cover upon the table, rattled the breakfast dishes into place, and drew up two chairs.

Flo came in then, dressed in a simple little blue frock, her nose powdered, her dark

hair, with a glint of bronze in it, freshly waved.

"Say, Baby, ya look like a million!" Benny beamed at her. "Well, let's gather round the festive board!"

"Festive!" sniffed Flo, seating herself. She held up a piece of burned toast. "What's this?"

"Toast," answered the waiter gloomily.

"I thought it was a shingle." Flo flung it down.

"It's toast," repeated the waiter more gloomily.

"Don't argue with 'er," said Benny. "Don't pay no attention to 'im, Mamma. Maybe the coffee's good."

With the elaborate flourish of a sleight-of-hand performer he whisked the silver cover off a dish. "Whatta ya know about that—eggs!"

"Give 'im a hand—he's good," said Flo witheringly.

The waiter stood by, tapping the check with a pencil.

"Pay the pelican," suggested Mr. Lewis.

The waiter turned a grieved glance upon him.

"Oh, yeh." Benny took the check and examined it. "For what?" he demanded. "Y'ain't gonna charge for that prop toast? Ah, well." He signed the check and handed the waiter a quarter.

The waiter stood looking at the coin in his hand.

"Well?" said Benny. "What's the matter with it?"

"I dunno—yet," murmured the waiter dismally, and took himself off.

Socially, too, the breakfast was a failure. Benny watched Flo covertly. Beneath her preoccupied manner he sensed an impending crisis in their domestic life. He did not understand her mood, but it worried him.

"Well, Baby," he began amiably, "whatta y'all dressed up for?"

"I'm expecting the Prince of Wales."

"Whatta ya gonna do—brush 'im off?" Benny laughed loudly at his own joke.

"Leave that one in the act," nodded Mr.

Lewis, and produced a toothpick, in the use of which he was inordinately expert.

Benny noticed that Flo was sitting motionless, staring down at her plate. He leaned toward her gently. "Whatsa matter, Baby? Y'ain't eatin' nothin'."

"I don't want any breakfast." With a sudden toss of her head she rose and walked across to the window and stood gazing down into the bleak gray court. Her lip trembled; she appeared about to cry. Benny cast an appealing glance toward Lew. The song writer shook his head. Utterly miserable and helpless, Benny watched her. Then the uncomfortable silence was broken by a knock on the door.

"Come in," called Benny.

A little wide-eyed blonde girl, dressed like a stage ingénue in vivid blue, with white furs, paused in the doorway.

"Hello," said she, in a baby-talk voice, and smiled toothsomely.

"Hello, Peggy." Benny stood up. "How's things?"

"I called your room, Lew"—she came

in, a studied cuteness in her walk—"an' they said you were up in seven-ten, so I come up. I wanta run over that new 'blues' number with you." She glanced around. Flo was staring out the window; Benny was staring at Flo. "What's the matter with everybody?"

Mr. Lewis regarded her solemnly. "Are you a reporter?"

"Go on!" giggled Peggy. "You're always wisecracking."

"They never believe ya, anyhow," sighed Mr. Lewis to no one in particular.

"Oh!" Something resembling an idea glimmered within Peggy Page's ornamental blonde head. "I forgot to congratulate you, Flo!"

Mr. Lewis appeared to slap his brow despairingly.

"Thanks," murmured Flo, with restraint.

"I thought the show was *won*-derful!" gurgled Peggy.

"Didja see it?" inquired Mr. Lewis with irony.

"Your dance was class!"

"There!" Benny exclaimed. "What did I tell ya?"

"Were the papers good?" Peggy wanted to know.

"They spelled the name of the theater right," said Mr. Lewis.

"The papers," Flo answered coldly, "said the show was rotten."

"Now, Baby," protested Benny, "there was one critic says——"

"Well"—Flo turned on him—"what did he say? Come on—tell me."

"Wait a minute, Baby." He put up his hands in the comic attitude of an early Nineteenth Century pugilist. "Ya don't wanta spar a coupla rounds with me, do ya?"

"Don't be a fool!"

"Who, me?"

"Who, me? That's the only come-back anybody ever gets out of you. You're small-time," flashed Flo angrily, "and you'll always *be* small-time!"

"But I got a big heart, ain't I?" He grinned. "Aw, come on, Honey——"

"Come on where?" She took a step toward him. "Where do we go after this show closes?"

"But it ain't closed yet!"

"How d'ya know?" interposed Lew from the sidelines. "Y'ain't been down t' the theayter this morning."

"Now, listen, Mamma——"

"And for God's sake stop calling me Mamma!" In her outburst of temper she seemed to have forgotten that they were not alone. "Oh, I'm sick of the whole game. I want to get away."

"Away—where?" Benny gulped.

"I don't care."

"Well—uh—y'ain't forgettin' we got a contract with the show?"

"By Saturday night there won't *be* any show?"

Miss Peggy Page, who possessed little tact and less delicacy, looked from one to the other. Then, in her baby-talk voice she remarked: "Gee, this is better than the heavyweight elimination fights! What's it all about?"

Benny looked pained. "It's over my head."

"Everything's over *your* head," his wife retorted briskly, "except your hat! I'll tell you what it's all about!" She confronted the unwelcome visitors, her cheeks flushed. "I'm through with this small-time stuff! I've got talent and I've got personality—if I do say so myself—and I've seen a lot worse-looking women riding around in Rolls-Royces. And they're headliners! I'm tired of trouping around three-a-day circuits like a trained seal. I'm sick to death of cheap hotels and upper berths—and not having nice clothes and all the things I *ought* to have!" Her voice broke.

There was a tremulous pause.

"Well—" Benny swallowed hard—"whatta ya gonna do, Honey?"

"You'll see!" she cried, and whirling swiftly, ran into the bedroom, and shut the door.

An uncomfortable silence.

"Gee!" whispered Peggy Page, very wide-eyed. "She must be mad about something!"

Slowly Benny walked over to the door, and his hand trembled on the knob.

"Now listen, Honey——" He went in. The door closed.

"Whatta ya know about that!" remarked Peggy Page in an audible whisper. "What's the matter with *her?*"

The song writer tipped back in his chair. "What's the matter with all of 'em?"

"Well, I don't understand it at all."

"They call it matrimony. Good title."

Whereupon the literal-minded young lady asked: "Didn't Harry Gold write a song by that title?"

"That's all right," said Lew, with the aid of his toothpick, "I'm stealin' it back."

But Miss Page seemed unwilling to leave the subject of the domestic imbroglio they had just witnessed. "She's kicking up this row—all because their show's a bust? Why, say—didn't the pro'bition officers close the Club Tangerine on me—when I was making the biggest hit of my career?"

"That's the gov'ament for ya."

She regarded him with latent suspicion. "Are you trying to kid me?"

"Not a chance."

The bedroom door opened and Benny came out, crestfallen. He walked across to the table, picked up a cigarette shakily, then tossed it away. "I'm afraid she's through with me, Lew."

"Yeh," replied his friend unemotionally, "she was tellin' us. . . ."

Benny's troubled eyes stared, unseeing, down at a spot on the floor, where some previous guest's spilled cocktail had practically burned a hole in the carpet.

"Don't worry!" comforted Peggy, the glad girl. "Everything'll turn out all right."

Mr. Lewis glanced at her, more in sorrow than in anger. "You know a lot of good ones, dontcha?"

"Gee!" murmured Benny, "we been together three years. . . ."

"It's a record," said Lew.

"You don't know that girl, Lew. This ain't like her. When she put her mind to it she could be the sweetest kid in the world."

"Who's writin' the music?" queried the cynic.

"No—on the level. Flo used to be the best little pal a guy ever had." He shook his head sadly. "An' she could make coffee!"

"Ya can get it at Childs." Mr. Lewis was not a sentimentalist.

"I dunno what's got into her," mused Benny. "She ain't satisfied lately. All she talks about is gettin' up in the world—an' ambition. I can't understand it. 'Course, we've had arguments before, but I never took a beatin' like just now. An' up till this mornin' I thought we was gettin' along fine."

"Maybe you wasn't lookin'."

"Whatta ya mean?"

"Think it over," suggested Lew. "She's easy on the eyes."

"Oh, no. She wouldn't *look* at another guy!"

"I used t' say that myself," said Lew. "An' then one time I come back from Chicago when I wasn't expected."

"Before you met me?" demanded Peggy.

"Sure. I had my troubles even then."

"Oh, Lew!" she giggled. "I never know when you're serious."

"That's one break for me," said Lew.

Benny was not listening. He stood slumped forward, hands in the pockets of his green dressing gown, his whole attitude expressive of dark despair.

Suddenly the telephone rang. He did not move. It rang clamorously for several seconds.

"The telephone's ringing," announced Peggy Page.

"There's a smart girl," nodded Lew to Benny. "*She* knows a telephone bell when she hears one!"

"Oh, you go on!" countered Miss Page.

Quietly Benny picked up the telephone. "Hello? . . . Who? . . . Oh, hello, Mr. Hummel. . . ."

Lew and Peggy exchanged glances.

"Yeh . . . we're in. . . . All right. . . . Sure." Benny put down the telephone. "It's B. B. Hummel."

"That big stiff!" commented Miss Page. "He was *my* agent once."

"He's everybody's agent," said Benny, "but they don't always know it till somebody else gives 'em a job. Then Hummel comes in for five per cent. Ya know what that bird does——"

"I believe it," nodded Lew.

"—He stands in his window, an' if he sees an actor goin' into a manager's office, he grabs the 'phone an' tells the manager he's sendin' you over."

"Five per cent.," was Lew's comment. "An' all he's got is a window."

"He's on his way over now." Benny lighted a cigarette nervously. "I know what he wants. He knows the show's a flop, an' he's gonna offer us three days in Utica or Poughkeepsie after it closes. Wait'll Flo hears this—she'll blow up!"

"If that Turk's coming here," declared Miss Page, "I'm going to beat it." And she began to gather up her gloves, purse, lipstick, and various other impedimenta.

"I don't live here neither." Lew arose to take his leave.

"He couldn't be bringing anything but bad news," muttered Benny.

Peggy took his hand. She always made a great point of being sincere. "G'bye, Benny. Tell Flo g'bye."

"We'll see ya later, maybe." Benny smiled half-heartedly.

"One word of advice." Lew held open the door. "If B. B. Hummel's comin' up here—hide the radiator!"

They were gone. Benny heard Flo come out of the bedroom.

"Have those friends of yours left?"

He turned. She was dressed for the street. "They walked right out on me." He smiled, with an effort. "Where ya goin'?"

"Out," said Flo.

"Out—where?"

"When I told you I was through I meant it."

"Ya mean—ya wanta split?"

"Yes." She looked away.

"But ain't this all kinda sudden? I——"

"When you've made up your mind to do a thing, the time to do it is now."

"Well—what're ya gonna do?"

"I'm going to get another partner."

A pause. Then he said huskily: "Ya think I'll never make the grade."

"It don't look like it to me. We've tried it together three years."

Benny stared down at the floor. "Well—I don't wanta stand in your way. . . ." He shifted on one foot uneasily. "I kind of always thought we was—more to each other than just—dancin' partners. . . . I—I thought you loved me—up to this mornin'. . . . *We*—we been through worse times than this together—an' you never complained."

"Yes, I know." Flo's blue eyes were cloudy. "But——"

"Hard luck," went on Benny, "is supposed to bring people that love each other closer together. Why—ya used to laugh at all our troubles."

"You can't keep on laughing forever."

"Sure ya can!"

"That's just the trouble with you." Her voice sharpened. "You laugh at everything—an' leave me to do the worrying. That's

why we're still where we were when I married you. No—there's only one way to get up in the world—and that's to *go* there. I've made up my mind."

A knock on the hall door. The middle-aged bellboy came in carrying a newspaper and a blue and white striped hat box. "I got your *Graphic*, Mrs. Darrell. An' this hat just come, C. O. D."

"Tell them to collect at the desk," said Flo, taking the box.

"O. K.," assented the bellboy. "I couldn't find a notice of your show in here"— he handed Benny the *Graphic*—"but I see where the big fight's gonna be held in New York."

"Yeh? That's fine." Benny seemed disinterested. "Here." He handed him a tip.

"An' them other papers," the bellboy reminded him, "was forty cents."

Once more Benny reached into his pocket.

"Say, I got a new one for ya, Mr. Darrell —stop me if you've heard it. It seems there was a Jew an' a Irishman——"

"Yeh, I heard that one," said Benny.

"Besides, I'm kinda busy." He gave the bellboy a half dollar.

"Sure—all right. Thanks." The bellboy went out, closing the door.

Flo had taken off her little gray hat and removed the new blue one from its box. He watched her go into the bedroom and put it on.

"Salomy!" she called.

The bull pup scampered after her. Benny heard the harness being buckled on. Then Flo came out, with Salomy on a leash.

"I—I'll send for my trunk this afternoon —when I know where I'll be." She avoided his eyes.

"How about the show? It's sure to run a couple of weeks, anyhow."

"I'll be at the theater to-night."

"All right." He looked down at the bull pup. She beamed up at him, wagging her curly wisp of a tail frantically. "Ya takin' Salomy?"

"Why—yes."

He reached down and patted the dog's head. "Ya won't forget to feed her?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, I was only thinkin'—ya're not used to fixin' her food an' ya might forget it." Salomy licked his hand affectionately. "Ya can get those dog biscuits at most any delicatessen. . . ."

Flo turned away. "Yes, I know." Her voice sounded the least bit unsteady. She moved toward the door. "Good—bye."

Benny could not believe that it was really happening. His lips moved twice before he was able to speak. "G'bye. . . ."

Then she went out. The door closed. The jingle of Salomy's harness died away down the hall.

He stood there, a sense of desolation engulfing him. Once, in his lost childhood in Altoona, he had "gone on" for the first time one amateur night in the old vaudeville theater, attempting a buck-and-wing dance, and at the jeers and catcalls of the audience they had turned out the lights on him and he had stood alone and frightened on the dark stage. It was like that now. . . .

Bewildered, he glanced around the empty room. On the table lay the little gray hat she had discarded. He walked over and picked it up wistfully.

"Gee. . . ."

Chapter 2

IN THE narrow lobby downstairs a flutter of excitement stirred among the staff: Mr. Peattie, the plump clerk behind the desk, the red-haired telephone operator, the cigar-counter girl, and the middle-aged bellboy.

All four were peering out through the glass revolving door. In front of the hotel

a shining black Rolls-Royce town car was just driving away.

"Is *that* a swell bus!" observed Leo, the bellboy. "Ask me, somebody."

"That guy must have plenty of coin in the old sock," mused the red-haired telephone operator.

And the cigar-counter girl remarked: "It's the first time anything but a taxi has ever stopped in front since I been here."

Mr. Peattie picked up the large white florist's box that the chauffeur had just left.

"Front boy!" he called. Mr. Peattie had once clerked in a larger hotel, so he continued to say "front boy," though there was but one on duty. "For Miss Sloane." He read the tag. "Here—take this up to seventen."

"I wonder what kinda flowers they are?" mused the red-haired telephone operator. "I bet they cost plenty of cigar coupons."

"What did the sho-fer say the guy's name was?"

"Winston," replied Mr. Peattie. "Alexander Winston."

"Some stage-door John, prob'ly."

"I bet he don't know Miss Sloane's got a husband." Leo grinned. "Say, that'd be a sketch, wouldn't it—if this here Winston come callin' on her, an' Darrell socked 'im——"

"If she's the kind would go out with another fella, Mr. Darrell ought to sock *her!*" declared the red-haired telephone operator.

"I think you're stuck on Darrell yourself!" Leo taunted her.

"I am not!"

"Sure y' are. Every time he walks through the lobby you just about fall off your chair!"

"Well, I like *him* better than *her. She* never notices me——"

"Take these flowers up to seven-ten," interrupted Mr. Peattie.

"O. K." Leo leisurely picked up the box. "Sadie," he called across to the cigar-counter girl. "Whatta ya know—the kid here's got a crush on Benny Darrell, of Darrell an' Sloane!"

"I have not!" denied the telephone operator indignantly.

"Ah, ya have, too!"

"Less noise!" hissed Mr. Peattie. "Do you want Baumgarten to hear you?"

The argument ceased. They were all afraid of Baumgarten, the manager.

The elevator door clanged open, and Flo Sloane stepped out, with Salomy scampering ahead on the leash.

"Say, Mrs. Darrell"—Leo handed her the florist's box—"these just come for you."

Flo took it wonderingly. "Who in the world——" She untied the string and pushed off the cover. In a nest of green tissue paper lay a dozen orchids.

"Oh!" gasped Flo.

The clerk, the telephone operator, the cigar-stand girl, and the bellboy all craned their necks to see the flowers.

Flo set the box on the counter and opened a large white envelope. In it was a sheet of notepaper bearing a crest. Wide-eyed, Flo read the masculine scrawl below:

My dear Miss Sloane:

I have been an admirer of you so long that I decided it was time something ought to be done about it. Joe Bergen took me around to your dressing room last night after the opening, but you had gone. I'm enclosing a letter of introduction from him, just to take the curse off my informality. I hope you will accept these few posies and that you'll be in when I call this afternoon.

Faithfully yours,
Alexander Winston.

There was another envelope, enclosed. It contained a typewritten letter from Bergen, the producer of the show. "Introducing Mr. Alexander Winston, the well-known polo player. . . ." Bergen realized the value of advertising.

Polo player! Flo glanced again at the embossed crest on Alexander Winston's notepaper. She was aware that her heart was behaving queerly.

"Those're certainly swell flowers," remarked Leo, the intimate bellboy.

"Yes." Flo glanced out through the glass door. A shining black Rolls-Royce had drawn up at the curb, and from it a tall, well-dressed young man was descending. He

spoke a word to the chauffeur, then came into the lobby. His lean features, brown from the sun of Florida, were what Flo would have called "aristocratic." He had that air about him. . . .

He recognized her at once, and came toward her with an easy smile.

"I beg your pardon." He took off his hat.

Flo saw that his hair was fair, that he had a small moustache and beautiful teeth. There was nothing "fresh" in his approach, she assured herself.

"I didn't know I had timed my arrival so accurately. I'm Alexander Winston," he said.

"How do you do." Flo smiled and gave him her hand. "I was just reading your letter. And thank you for these lovely flowers—orchids!" she corrected herself hastily. They were the first orchids she had ever received—but it was not like Flo to mention that fact.

"You're just on your way out."

His manner was so suavely familiar—it was as though he had known her for years.

"My car is here. Can I take you any place?"

"Oh, thank you"—she appeared slightly flustered, as they walked across the lobby—"no—I—I was just——"

"Taking the dog for a little air," he suggested, smiling. They went out through the revolving door. "Perhaps we could have tea——"

"Oh, I'm afraid not," said Flo. "I—I have an errand to do."

"Then let me walk part way with you. May I?"

"Why, yes—sure."

He turned and spoke to the chauffeur, standing by the door of the Rolls-Royce. Flo had never beheld such a gorgeous car. The chauffeur touched his cap. Then Alexander Winston fell into step beside her, and they strolled up toward Sixth Avenue. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced down at her. Prettier off-stage than on. Superb figure. . . .

"I hope," he said, "you won't mind my coming around this way. You see—I simply *had* to meet you."

Flo blushed. She was, of course, flattered that he had wanted to meet her. Yet she felt vaguely uneasy. Not quite sure of the proper procedure. Flo had never been a flirt. And after the scene she had just gone through with Benny——

"The orchids were beautiful!" she said. Then she remembered that she had walked off, leaving them on the desk. "Oh! I wonder if they'll have sense enough to take them up to the room!" Suddenly it occurred to her that she was not going back to the room. She had left the hotel forever. . . .

"I don't know what Benny will do——" She was thinking aloud.

"Benny?" repeated the young man by her side.

"Yes—uh—" her cheeks bloomed rosily above the rouge—"my husband."

"Oh." He did not seem surprised. " So you have one of those?"

Flo laughed nervously. She realized that this was adventure—but she had never been an adventuresome person. At least, not with

men. Still, she had always yearned to meet "society" people like Alexander Winston. And now, here he was! With a fluttering heart she walked along beside him in the cold February sunshine.

"Do you know where I first saw you?"

"No," she answered. "Where?"

"It was almost a year ago—at a vaudeville theater in Chicago. . . ." Winston's cool, confident voice went on.

But Flo did not hear him. She was thinking of Benny, back there in that cheerless room, where the sunshine never came in.

Chapter 3

BENNY was still standing in the center of the room, looking down at the little gray hat in his hands, when a businesslike rap on the door aroused him. It was Baumgarten, the manager of the hotel.

Baumgarten was a pallid, fleshy man with elusive little eyes. He walked on rubber heels. Three evenings a week he sang in a

church choir, and he had the soul of a house detective.

"Good-morning," he said, with chill politeness.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Baumgarten." Benny automatically shook hands with him. "How are ya?"

"I thought I'd better come up and have a little talk with you."

"Yeh?" Benny was at once uneasy.

"You know the hotel is glad to accommodate its patrons—at least for a while—if they're prominent people. We have let your bill go over for three weeks, now, because you expected your show to be a hit, and we thought you'd be here all winter. But, under the circumstances, I'm afraid we'll have to ask you to settle the account to date."

"Why—uh—what's the matter?"

"Your show closes Saturday night, doesn't it?"

"I don't think so," Benny told him. "It ought to run a couple of——"

"Miss Gilda Ramos is in your show, isn't she?"

"Yeh."

"Well," said Baumgarten coolly, "she just came back from the theater a few minutes ago, and she says the notice is up already. You close Saturday night. Of course, the hotel has to protect itself."

"Oh, sure." Benny's pulse throbbed in his throat. The show was closing!

Baumgarten drew a large folded sheet of stiff paper from his pocket and held it out. "We'd like this settled as soon as possible." He turned to go. "Fine morning, isn't it?"

"Great!" murmured Benny.

The door closed on Baumgarten's rubber-heeled departure. Benny opened the bill. Its network of small squares was covered with inked figures. The total stared at him in red. Four hundred and seventy-nine dollars.

"Cheese!" Benny gasped. He had had no idea it was as much as this. Even with their two-weeks' guarantee of salary, he couldn't pay it!

The door knob rattled. Baumgarten back again? More bad news? Or could it be—his heart fluttered—could it be—Flo? Perhaps

she had repented and come back! Perhaps —— But it was Lew Lewis's doleful countenance revealed in the doorway.

"Hey—who d'ya think's downstairs?"

Benny stared at the floor. "She's quit me, Lew," he muttered huskily.

"Yeh?" Mr. Lewis had no time for a sentimental scene. "Who d'ya think I just seen downstairs in the lobby?"

"How would *I* know?"

"Gus LeGrand."

"Who's he?"

"You been in the sticks too long," reproved Lew. "Gus LeGrand's got more night clubs than Hummel's got gold teeth!"

"Night clubs?"

"Sure. The Club Montparnasse, the Club Fleur de Lys—and a flock of others. He gets the French names for 'em off perfume labels."

"What's that to do with me?" Benny's depression deepened.

"Hummel's bringin' him here. I seen' em down at the cigar counter. LeGrand asks for a sixty-cent cigar—in *this* joint!"

"Well—what's the big idea?"

"I'm only tippin' y' off. See ya later."

Two figures loomed behind Mr. Lewis as he moved to go, and B. B. Hummel, the booking agent, crowded past him into the room, followed by Gus LeGrand. Hummel was a withered, dapper little man of mysterious age, fancifully attired, a flower in his buttonhole. He came in twisting his curled mustaches and swinging a bamboo cane. LeGrand was bulky, florid, middle-aged: of central European derivation. His clothes were obviously expensive and somewhat too elaborate in color scheme. He smoked a cigar without removing it from his thick lips.

As they entered the booking agent greeted Lew Lewis patronizingly. "Hello, Lew. Still writing songs?"

"Hello, B. B. Still pickin' pockets?" And Mr. Lewis strolled off down the hall.

Hummel forced a rusty laugh and shut the door. "Just a song writer," he explained to his companion. Then, with an expansive gesture: "Gus, I wantcha to know Benny

Darrell, of Darrell an' Sloane. Benny, this is Mr. Gus LeGrand."

"How are you?" LeGrand spoke huskily, with a slight accent, cigar clamped between strong yellow teeth.

"Gladda meecha," said Benny quietly.

Without invitation, Hummel dragged forth a chair for LeGrand and one for himself. They did not remove their hats. LeGrand's crafty eyes roved around the room and discovered a framed photograph of Flo on the table. He peered at it intently for a few seconds, then sat down. Benny remained standing, his manner noticeably distrait.

"Well," began the booking agent brightly, "how's the little woman?"

"Mrs. Darrell?" said Benny. "She's all right."

"Great little girl," Hummel informed LeGrand. Then: "Well, Benny, what did I always tell ya?"

"I'll bite."

"Always kiddin'—ya know what I mean?" Hummel grinned at LeGrand.

"Let's get down to business." The night-club proprietor removed his derby.

"Every time," nodded Hummel. "Well, Benny, Mr. LeGrand seen your show last night."

"Yeh?"

"He liked your act. He thinks Flo's great."

"Yeh?"

"He thinks you're good, too. He thinks you're a clever team—the two of ya together—ya know what I mean?"

And LeGrand spoke, in his thick, hard voice: "It's the woman that counts in a dance team. The man's only a dummy."

Benny stared into space. "A dummy's right."

"Well, Benny," said Hummel briskly, "here's what I slipped over for ya. I seen ya was good—ya know what I mean?—an' I says to myself, 'B. B., grab 'em before the others know they're good.' An' what's the answer?"

"Who knows?" murmured Benny.

"Well—I got Gus, here, to make ya an offer!"

"I run into you on the street," LeGrand corrected him. "By accident."

"It looks like it, at that, don't it?" Hummel cackled his professional laugh. "But I was just on my way over to see ya, Gus—about these two. Here's an agent that never lays down on the job. Ya know what I mean?"

"Sure," said Benny. "Do *you?*"

"Well"— Hummel twirled his bamboo cane—"whatta ya say, Benny? Great—eh?"

"Is it a secret?" inquired Benny.

"Don't mind him, Gus." Hummel grinned jovially. "He thinks with his feet. Like all hoofers."

LeGrand was glancing around the room.

"Where's——"

"Where's the little lady?" Hummel finished for him.

"Why"— Benny swallowed—"she—she just stepped out."

"I'll give you five hundred a week," said LeGrand abruptly.

Chapter 4

FIVE hundred a week! Half a grand!" Hummel leaned forward eagerly. "Is that an offer?"

Benny did not seem to hear.

"I am opening a new night club—the most select in town," continued LeGrand. "I ain't got a name for it yet, but you can take it from me it will be an honor to work there."

"Didja hear that, Benny? How about a nice little contract?"

Benny stared at the floor. If only this offer had come yesterday. But now Flo was gone. It was too late. "I ain't interested," he said quietly.

Hummel bristled. "Whatta ya mean, y' ain't interested?"

"That's what I said."

"Now, be sensible, Benny. Why, there's a lot of 'em would give both feet t' dance at any of Gus LeGrand's clubs. I can get a dozen teams in an hour—but I wanta do ya a good turn. Ya know what I mean?"

Benny did not answer. He was not even looking at them. Hummel and LeGrand exchanged glances.

"Suppose I was to offer six hundred?" said LeGrand.

"'Ja get that, Benny?" cried the booking agent. "Six hundred a week—for workin' half an hour a night!"

"I told ya—I ain't interested."

"Ain't interested?" grunted LeGrand. "Who d'you t'ink you are—Pavlowa?"

"Why, kid, ya'll be the sensation of New York," wheedled Hummel. "Wait'll ye see this new club. It'll knock ya dizzy with mirrors! Ya can't get a table already—right this minute—an' the place ain't been opened yet. An' the patronage! All class. Ya know what I mean? Why, before ya're there a week all the swells in town'll be wantin' ta meecha."

"That's a lot of popcorn," muttered Benny. Yet—it was what Flo had always yearned for. And now she was gone. . . . But he couldn't tell *them*. . . .

"I'll offer you seven-fifty—an' not a cent more. I'm a sucker for doin' it." LeGrand stood up and clapped on his hat.

"Seven-fifty!" echoed Hummel. "Why, if ya was to read about it ya wouldn't believe it! Ya can quote me—it's a wow of an offer. An' I wouldn't lie to ya, would I?"

A pause. Benny had not moved.

"Well?" LeGrand coughed.

"Whatta ya say, Benny?"

"It's too late."

"Say—it's never too late t' take seven-fifty a week!"

"He must be crazy," grunted LeGrand.

"Crazy? Worse'n that!" Hummel sprang to his feet. "Now, look here——"

"I told ya—it's too late." They could not see the suffering in Benny's eyes.

"Well—that settles it. We can't do any business." LeGrand started toward the door.

"Wait a minute, Gus. Leave 'im ta me. There's something the matter with this guy, an' I'm gonna find out what it is. Turnin' down seven-fifty a week—as if it was a bale of hay! Whatta ya think I am?"

"It's no use." Benny stirred impatiently. "You're wastin' your time. I—ain't interested, that's all."

"All right." Hummel shrugged his shoulders. "All right. There's plenty of others." He took a few steps toward the door, then turned. "Only—when ya're back doin' three shows a day, remember it was B. B. Hummel told ya!"

Benny stood with his back to them, staring out into the bleak court. LeGrand had

opened the door. He turned, now, and made a sign to Hummel, then they walked toward Benny again.

Behind them the door was pushed open wider, and Flo Sloane, carrying the bull pup in her arms, stood there. Nobody saw her. She paused.

"I always get what I want," said LeGrand gruffly. "I'll make it eight hundred."

"I'd 'a' told ya, myself—only I knew ya wouldn't believe me!" cried Hummel. "Eight hundred a week——"

"What did you say?"

They turned, startled, to face Flo.

"We-ll!" beamed the booking agent, flourishing his cane. "It's lucky you come in—we was just goin'! Shake hands with Mr. Gus LeGrand. He owns every night club ya'd wanta be seen in."

LeGrand's eyes lighted and his thick lips smiled. He took off his hat. He even removed his cigar. "Ah, Miss Sloane!"

"How do you do." She did not give him her hand. "What's all this about?"

Benny was staring at her as if seeing a ghost. His lips trembled.

"I was just offering your partner eight hundred a week"— LeGrand's eyes strayed caressingly over her slender, rounded figure —"for you to dance at my new place."

"An' he wouldn't take it—can ya beat that?" exclaimed Hummel. "Eight hundred a week—the swellest night club in New York—an' he wouldn't take it!"

"Eight hundred a week?" Flo put down the dog and walked across to Benny. Her eyes were bright with excitement. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm married, ain't I?" Benny grinned, with a flash of his old-time spirit.

Flo turned to LeGrand. "We'll take it."

Benny's heart was thumping a fast jazz. She was going to stick!

"That's the girl!" beamed Hummel. "Where would he be withoutcha?"

And Benny was thinking: "For the first time in your life you *said* something!"

"What about a contract?" asked Flo, very businesslike.

"Come over to my office in an hour," said LeGrand. Since she had come into the room he had not taken his eyes from her.

"I'll bring 'em over myself," Hummel assured him. Then, jauntily: "Be back for ya in forty-five minutes, Benny!"

"Sure!" said Darrell and Sloane in unison.

"O. K." LeGrand smiled very personally at Flo, then followed the booking agent out into the hall. The door closed behind them.

Salomy was frisking joyously around her master's feet. He knelt down and gathered her into his arms.

After a moment Flo spoke. "I—I came back to get Salomy's blanket. I forgot it."

He did not look up. "I didn't know you was comin' back."

"Well—I'm back." She took off her hat and flung it on a chair. "Eight hundred a week—think of it! The swellest night club in New York! . . . Clothes. . . . Motor cars. . . . Everybody worth knowing. . . . It's just what I've dreamed of all my life." Suddenly

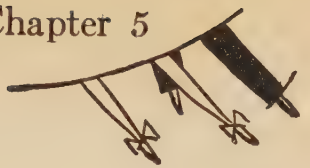
she turned to him. "Did he offer eight hundred right off?"

"No. First he offered five."

"Then you raised him to eight!" And before he could protest, she exclaimed with a radiant smile: "You're a better business man than I thought!"

"Who—me?" said Benny.

Chapter 5



EVERY time one of Gus LeGrand's night clubs was padlocked by the prohibition officers, he promptly opened another. The Club Bon Bon was his newest and most elaborate. It was, as B. B. Hummel remarked on viewing the expensive outlay of silken hangings and mirrors, the last word. And the last word was "class."

The Club Bon Bon opened on the evening of Washington's Birthday. Gus LeGrand, having recently, through courts of law, become an American citizen, was very patriotic. Besides, it was no secret that holidays invariably drew the largest crowds—at advanced prices. The Club Bon Bon was a success from the moment the velvet rope was drawn back to admit a gala crowd, recruited from the social register, the registers of Dun and Bradstreet and *Who's Who.* Broadway was represented, table to table alongside Park Avenue. Stars of stage and cinema. The Mayor.

It was a triumph for Gus LeGrand: another feather in the Indian war bonnet of his night-club successes. But the honors of the evening went to a pair of slim, youthful dancers. None of the patrons of the Club Bon Bon had ever heard of Darrell and Sloane, but after the opening dance number their names buzzed among the tables. Darrell and Sloane had something new to offer the jaded night-club fellows. There was a fleet grace, a rhythmic perfection in their

dancing—but, more than that, it had humor: it was a travesty on all the "ballroom" dancing that had ever been seen.

From the amazing applause they received, and from the number of bows they were forced to take, hand in hand in the amber glow of the spotlight, it was no secret that Darrell and Sloane were "made." Of the hundreds who witnessed their triumph two men, at opposite ends of the crowded room, were thinking what it would mean to Flo Sloane. At a ringside table with a party of his fashionable friends Alexander Winston smiled discreetly. Very soon it would be the vogue to know this lovely dancer—and it was this gentleman's pride to keep ahead of the vogue. Unobserved, in the shadows under the balcony, Gus LeGrand also smiled. For the moment he was not considering this event in terms of restaurant receipts and *couvert* charges. His thick lips did not move; nevertheless, he was saying—to himself: "One of these days she'll see who can do the most for her. I always get what I want. . . ."

Back in their dressing room Benny and Flo, flushed with happiness, were receiving the accolade of no less personage than B. B. Hummel. His effusive congratulations were possibly not entirely motivated by an ingenuous nature, for he was to share in their triumph—to the extent of five per cent.

"What did I always tell ya!" The diamonds twinkling on his shirt front were no brighter than his eyes. "Ya went over big. I never heard any hoofers get such a hand in a night club!"

And Benny said modestly: "Yeh—I guess we made 'em lay down their knives an' forks."

An attendant entered carrying a box of orchids and a huge basket of red roses.

"Who's this—Alexander Winston?" queried Benny, picking up a card that lay among the orchids.

"Oh, he's a friend of Joe Bergen's," answered Flo casually. "Aren't these *beautiful* roses from Mr. LeGrand!"

"Yessir, ya certainly went over big." The little booking agent winked impressively.

"An' this is only the beginning—ya know what I mean?"

*

Overnight Darrell and Sloane had "arrived." The fantastic fame of Broadway overtakes its favored ones swiftly. Three weeks before they had not been able to pay their hotel bill. Now they were the reigning dance team of the night clubs. Everyone came to see them at the Bon Bon, and each day B. B. Hummel brought tidings of attractive offers from producers of musical shows.

"They're all after ya," Hummel informed Benny. "But just sit pretty an' leave everything t' me. Here's an agent that never goes t' sleep—ya know what I mean?"

"Ya musta been asleep all the time we was hoofin' three shows a day for eighty-five bucks a week!" scoffed Benny. "Where was all these big offers when Flo an' me didn't have the price of a steak?"

"I always knew ya was good, Benny!"

"Well, ya certainly kept it a secret!

Cheese"— Benny shook his head— "it hands me a laugh. Ya get one break in this town, an' right away all the apes that wouldn't of letcha in their office is around slappin' ya on the back!"

Their opulent success, following so close on the run-down heels of their failure, had a curious effect on Flo. It seemed to bring her closer to Benny. Her angry rebellion had vanished as swiftly as a scene "blacked out" in a musical revue. From the moment she walked back into the room, on the day of LeGrand's first visit, the quarrel had never been mentioned. For the present her restlessness was dormant, her bounding ambition being appeased.

They were now established in an expensive uptown hotel, and Flo appeared happy and contented. She revelled in her sudden fame and spent hours every afternoon shopping for pretty frocks and hats, while Benny consorted with Lew Lewis and other boon companions along Broadway.

Twice, after the opening of the Club Bon Bon, Alexander Winston sent orchids to her,

and once a note asking her to luncheon. Flo neither acknowledged the flowers nor replied to the note. Her motive was a mixture of chaste wifely devotion and a theory that it would do this swell no harm to be treated rough. On three evenings she saw him with a party at a table on the edge of the dance floor as she whirled past in Benny's arms. Once she smiled her most charming smile at him. On that evening Winston had despatched a waiter to her dressing room (LeGrand had given them separate dressing rooms) requesting her to join his party, but she had sent back word that she had another engagement.

Even if she had adopted such a procedure deliberately to pique Winston's interest, she could not have succeeded more completely. This one, Winston told himself, was going to be difficult. But he delighted in the Chase. The newspapers invariably referred to him as one of New York's most eligible bachelors. Certainly he was one of the most wary. He was no more vain than any other man in his situation would have been. That

he was handsome, that he had social position and a fortune—these facts he accepted as a matter of course. He possessed the perfect assurance of the rich young man of fashion. There was nothing of the villain in his nature. To him, the pursuit of a woman was quite as sporting as the pursuit of a fox—and twice as thrilling.

It was highly improbable, he thought, that this obscure little dancer would be able to hold out long. True, his repeated offerings of orchids had failed. This nettled him somewhat, but sharpened his zest for the Chase.

"Any man who sends flowers to a woman is a fool," he told a friend at their club one day. "The fellow who keeps an actress's rooms filled with orchids never gets to first base."

"What else can you do?" queried his friend, a rich if unimaginative young man.

"The secret of success with women," Winston said lightly, "is to get 'em interested—then walk out on 'em."

"That may work with you," sighed his

friend. "If *I* ever walked out—I'd never get back!"

"My dear fellow," smiled Winston, "I've never known it to fail."

Had he realized it, however, his "system" was on the brink of its first failure. He assumed that he had aroused Flo Sloane's interest and this assumption was not far wrong. The next step would be to go away and leave her wondering—for a while.

One day Flo read in a newspaper that Alexander Winston had sailed for England, to stay with his sister, the Countess of Heathermoor. And if she wondered she made no mention of it to her husband.

It was characteristic of Benny Darrell that, whether things were going right or wrong, he hadn't a worry in the world. Having had nothing but vaudeville for a background, there was no particular depth to his nature, and his philosophy was merely an exuberant optimism. Life for him held two interests—his wife and their dancing. Now that both had been acclaimed by

the world (to him the world lay between Broadway and Lexington Avenue, Times Square and Columbus Circle) he wore contentment jauntily, like a flower in his lapel.

*

It must be said for B. B. Hummel that he managed their affairs shrewdly. When the Club Bon Bon closed for the season in April, Hummel booked a big-time vaudeville tour for Darrell and Sloane, ten weeks, at fifteen hundred dollars a week. In May he signed a contract with Bergen, the producer, for them to dance in a new musical show in the autumn, at two thousand a week. Meanwhile, LeGrand had reëngaged them for next season, at double their original salary. Things were coming their way.

They closed their vaudeville tour in mid-July, and repaired to Atlantic City for a rest. Flo would have preferred Great Neck as being somewhat higher in the social scale, but Benny had dreamed all his life of a vacation at Atlantic City, in a big hotel, with plenty of money and nothing to worry

about. So Flo, still playing the dutiful little wife, acquiesced.

In September Bergen's new revue, *Hotsy Totsy*, opened and was a glittering success from the start. Darrell and Sloane received a hearty reception on the opening night in New York, and the newspaper notices were immensely flattering.

"Some different from our first opening—last year," said Flo resentfully.

"What's it matter, Baby?—we got 'em goin' now, ain't we?" Benny kissed her resoundingly. They were in a taxi, halted in a traffic jam.

"You mustn't do that—with everybody looking." She drew away.

"Well, it's legal anyhow, Mamma—we're married!" Benny's cheerfulness could not be dampened.

The Club Bon Bon reopened in October, and Darrell and Sloane triumphed once more. Each evening, after finishing their sensational turn in the second act of *Hotsy Totsy*, they were driven (in their new magenta limousine, by their new chauffeur,

in magenta livery) over to the Club Bon Bon, where at twelve-fifteen they danced for twenty minutes. And for this double nightly appearance they received a living wage of thirty-six hundred dollars a week.

One important feature of their growing popularity was that they changed their dance "routines" frequently; always giving the public something new. This was due to Benny's cleverness in devising steps. Their dance numbers in the show were entirely different from the ones they performed at the night club. And their fame continued to mount steadily.

Chapter 6

MR. ALEXANDER WINSTON was often in Flo's thoughts during the seven months of his absence. His social position, the first she had ever encountered, held her in a certain awe of him, and his cool assurance baffled her. With Gus LeGrand, however, it was different. She was more familiar with Gus LeGrand's type.

Flo realized intuitively that the proprietor of the Club Bon Bon was interested in her. To what extent, she did not know. LeGrand was cagey. He had never been overfriendly toward Benny, and he had had few opportunities of seeing Flo alone. But she was always conscious of his eyes following her whenever he was in the room.

One evening he surprised her by knocking on her dressing-room door at the theater while she was making up. Benny's dressing room was on the floor above. She was fully costumed, so she admitted him, and he sat by, hat and cigar in hand, while she applied the finishing touches of her make-up. In the mirror she covertly observed his florid features. There was a strange gleam in his eyes as he stared at her bare shoulders and back, revealed by the flame-colored dance costume.

A moment passed. Neither of them spoke. Then her maid left the room on an errand. LeGrand leaned forward.

"The biggest pleasure I ever got out of

life," he said abruptly, "was putting you over—making you a success."

Flo was surprised. "You've been awfully nice to us, Mr. LeGrand." She smiled at him, in the mirror.

"Some day," his thick voice continued, "we'll talk over the plans I got for you."

"For Benny and me, you mean?"

"In this game," he answered evasively, "a man can go only so far. With *you*, now—there's no reason why you can't be the biggest dance star in the business."

Flo laughed. But her vanity was touched. LeGrand's face was very solemn.

"It's certainly sweet of you to say so," she told him.

Her maid came in then, and after a moment LeGrand rose and took his leave. Flo was puzzled. From the first day she had met him she had been conscious of an expression in his eyes that belied his placid manner. Yet he had never, by gesture or insinuation, betrayed himself, had never strayed from his pose of friend and benefactor. And, after all, he was a practical

friend to have in the background—so long as he stayed there. For the first time she found herself thinking of *herself* as a dancer, without Benny. The idea was startling.

However, she said nothing to Benny about LeGrand's visit. The next time she met LeGrand he was stolid and impersonal, as usual. Yet she was aware of his eyes following her. A queer egg, Flo thought. She did not know that the secret of Gus LeGrand's success was his skill in playing a waiting game.

*

In December Flo saw Alexander Winston for the first time since his return from Europe. Though she did not, of course, know it, his protracted stay had resulted from an acquaintance with a certain Spanish lady of title: an acquaintance begun in Paris during Grand Prix Week, and which had run an itinerant course over the Continent, terminated only by the unexpected appearance of the lady's husband at Cannes in late November.

He was with a party of friends at a ringside table at the Club Bon Bon, and when Flo saw him, so great was her surprise that she missed a step of the dance. However, Benny deftly covered the misstep, and they finished the number to abundant applause.

"What happened, Baby?" Benny asked amiably, after they had taken their bows. "I never knew ya t' do that before."

"Oh, I guess my mind wasn't on the race, that's all."

It did not occur to Flo that this misstep in the dance might be symbolic. She was thinking that Alexander Winston was even more attractive than she had remembered.

However, he sent no word to her, an omission which mildly annoyed her. There was no reason, of course, why he should have, but she resented his disinterest, nevertheless. A few days after Christmas she heard that he had gone to Palm Beach.

She saw him again in late February. It was an unexpected, and to Flo a romantic, meeting. Since their success Benny had become a member of the Monks, a minor

theatrical club, and had taken to spending much time there in company with Lew Lewis and other Broadway friends. On this particular evening he had hurried through their dances at the night club in order to get over to a "smoker" at the Monks, and Flo was left to go home alone. This situation, however, was not displeasing, for she often found relief in Benny's absence.

As she emerged from the side entrance, where her car waited, she saw a tall, slim figure in top hat and dark overcoat come out of the shadows. And by the light of winter moon she recognized Alexander Winston.

"I'm going to drive you home," he told her, without any formal greeting.

"But I have my own car." She said it rather proudly, as if the new limousine in a way bridged the gulf between them.

"Send him away," commanded Winston.

Flo hesitated. Her life had, for the past few months, been unexciting. Fame had proved as humdrum as obscurity. Benny was almost constantly with her, and do-

mesticity engulfed her quite as completely as if she had been a young wife in a Bronx kitchenette. To her this rich young man had always impersonated Romance. Well, what harm?

She walked over to the curb and told her chauffeur he need not wait. Then, smiling, she rejoined Winston. "I hadn't ought to do this——"

"Nonsense. My car's round the corner."

Flo was not a coquette. There was a certain simple honesty about her beneath the little pretensions, acquired since their success, that fascinated Winston. In the intimate darkness of his car, as they drove twice around Central Park, he let her talk about herself.

It was a part of Winston's charm that women, ten minutes after meeting him, felt that they had known him for years. Flo found herself telling him of her ambitions.

"I love nice things," she said, "and the people who have them and know what to do with them." Her lovely eyes clouded. "I've seen plenty of the other side—and it isn't so

good. Oh, I'm not saying anything against people that haven't got money. I'm sorry for 'em. But if you haven't got it, you can't have the things that make you—well, you know what I mean—charming and all that. I like people with money, because they've learned how to live. And I'm going to learn how, too—from those that can show me."

This was Flo's creed. Whatever its faults, it was what she honestly believed. Her husband would not have understood it. Winston did.

"I think it's damned intelligent of you," he said. And added casually: "Would it interest you to meet some of my friends?"

"I'd love to." Her voice was eager.

"They're very dull, I'm afraid," he said.

"Anything's dull that we're too used to," Flo answered.

And Winston fell to wondering about Benny Darrell.

Flo was very glad that he made no attempt to touch her hand in the car that night. She was impressed more than ever by his cool assurance. All that he and his world

stood for seemed to her the most desirable thing in life. When she said good-night at the door of her hotel her eyes were shining. There was no disloyalty to Benny in her thoughts: she was not even thinking of Benny.

In the succeeding months she saw Winston again, several times; and met a number of his friends and was properly impressed by them. A definite suggestion of their manner was creeping into her own; her voice acquired a trace of their fashionable accent. Benny began to notice alarming symptoms of her old restlessness.

"What is it ya want, Honey?" he asked one spring day. "We got just about everything, ain't we? We're on top—we're sittin' pretty. There ain't a more expensive joint in town than this hotel. Course, it's kind of stiff for me—but you like it, so I'm satisfied. You got cart blank for all the clo'es ya want t' buy. We got an auto we paid six thousand bucks for, an' a *sho*-fer——"

"Yes, I know!" Flo shrugged her ex-

quisite shoulders. "But there are so many other things I want!"

"Well, just whisper in my ear, Baby." He walked over and put his arms around her. "You know *me*—ya can have anything your little heart desires!"

Flo made no move to slide out of his embrace, as she so often did. "I've been thinking we ought to have a country place."

"Ya mean a shack somewheres—out at Great Neck, maybe, where all the show people——"

"No—not that!" she frowned. "I mean a house at Southampton or Greenwich—where the *real* people are."

"Well," he said, "there's some pretty *real* people live out at Great Neck. A lot of the boys at the Club——"

"We've got plenty of money in the bank," she interrupted. "We could afford a nice place."

Benny was playing with Salomy, tossing an old slipper, which the bull pup pranced away, snorting, to retrieve. He glanced after her affectionately "Be nice to have a little

cottage in the country, at that," he said. "Where Salomy could run loose. Well, why not look for one, Mamma?"

"I will!" Flo smiled suddenly and, reaching up, kissed him.

Chapter 7

THE "little cottage in the country" turned out to be an estate at Easthampton —as near to Southampton as real-estate values would permit: three acres of ground; a white Early American house (at least as early as 1912) with green shutters, set back from the road on a wide landscaped lawn; a swimming pool at the end of a formal

garden; a three-car garage, with servants' quarters above, and a gardener's cottage. Buying it took nearly all their savings, and in addition a heavy mortgage, but Flo appeared so pleased over the purchase that Benny put aside his objections. Anything to keep her happy. . . .

The success of their dancing had been the first step upon the shining highroad of Flo's ambition. Acquisition of this place at Easthampton was the second step. The third was Lady Margaret Thrace. Lady Margaret, the middle-aged spinster daughter of a duke, had recently come to New York to mend her fortunes by setting up shop as an interior decorator. She possessed considerable taste and a large acquaintance among fashionable clients. Naturally, the house at Easthampton needed redecorating, and Flo considered it a *grand coup* that Lady Margaret Thrace had been engaged, at a truly ducal fee, to see that Italian Renaissance chairs were not put in a Chinese Chippendale room.

Alec Winston, who had found the house

for them—it was not far from his mother's place at Southampton—had presented Flo to Lady Margaret. Whatever that crisp noblewoman's opinion of Flo was, she made no comment. However, she became instantly and humorously devoted to Benny.

Success had left Benny unchanged, save for the fact that his clothes were now made by a more expensive and more conservative (to his great regret) tailor. But the old Benny, with his ungrammatical Broadway patter, remained. Though he was the highest-paid dancer in New York, at heart he was still a three-a-day hoofer. And to Lady Margaret Thrace, daughter of a title three hundred years old, Benny was the real thing. She adored him.

With two such sponsors as Alec Winston and Lady Margaret Thrace to guide her entrance into the world she yearned for so passionately, Flo felt that life was opening up like a flower. Benny had met Winston several times, and though he had a natural suspicion of "society johns" he felt no dislike for him. That Winston was attracted

to Flo did not surprise him. Who wouldn't be? That Winston might one day become a serious rival did not occur to him. Such an idea was preposterous. Benny had an untroubled faith in his wife.

One day he was lunching with Peggy Page and Lew Lewis, whom Flo had never considered her peers and no longer consented to meet socially. They had changed very little in the past year. Miss Page became perhaps a trifle more blonde each season, and was still the darling of the cabarets. Lew Lewis was as cynical as ever, in spite of the great financial success of his recent song hit, "Bum-Bum-Boodle-Oo." If they resented Flo's avoidance of them, they never mentioned it, but spoke of her, rather, as an old friend who had gone away. Peggy Page inquired about her to-day, and Benny replied that she was lunching with Alexander Winston.

"That shirt front ain't tryin' to wreck your home, is he?" Lew demanded.

Benny laughed. "You comedians are all alike."

"I ain't foolin'. It pays to watch these boys that don't hafta work afternoons."

"He's just a harmless bimbo," protested Benny amiably.

"In this business," said the song writer sagely, "once a dame is made—everybody is around tryin' to make her."

"Ain't it the truth!" acquiesced Peggy Page. "Why, last night when I come out to sing my big number, a fella sitting all alone at the first table tried to make *me!*"

"No?" Lew regarded her solemnly. "Are you tryin' to scare me to death?"

"Oh, you go on!" retorted Miss Page.

*

The Club Bon Bon closed for the season at the end of April. *Hotsy Totsy*, it was predicted, would run well into the summer, so Flo and Benny felt themselves financially secure. To be sure the new place at Easthampton had cost a shocking amount of money, but like all stage folk they gave small consideration to the subject of money. There was always plenty more to be made.

Lady Margaret's workmen finished redecorating the house early in June. And immediately a butler, a footman, two maids, a cook, and a gardener were engaged. Flo intended to do things on an elaborate scale. The footman caused Benny much private mirth. In musical shows footmen were always chorus men. And this fellow, Frederick, with his high voice and delicate manner, wasn't far from the type.

The butler, Beecham, was something of a personage: a ponderous, slow-moving Englishman, bald, with a purple-veined nose and the dignity of a bishop. He had been for years in the service of old Mrs. Brompton Henry—*the* Mrs. Henry of New York and Newport. That he had been discharged for intemperance he did not, of course, mention: it was enough for Flo that he had been Mrs. Brompton Henry's butler. Both Flo and Benny stood in awe of him.

They moved to the country the first week in June. Three days later an untimely heat wave paralyzed theater attendance in New York, and *Hotsy Totsy* closed. Bergen, the

producer, had announced no plans for next season, but Flo and Benny were perfectly sure that he would desire their services. If he didn't, some other producer would. They gave financial matters no further thought and entered into the enjoyment of their first summer as landed gentry.

*

There were soon, however, several clouds drifting across the summer sky of Benny's happiness. When he recalled that his first thought of a "little shack in the country" had been to give Salomy, the bull pup, an outing, he could scarce repress a smile of irony. Before they had been at Easthampton three weeks Flo had installed, at great expense, a kennel of Russian wolfhounds. To these large silky and silly dogs Flo devoted hours each day, while Benny endeavored, in a small way, to make Salomy's holiday pleasant. He and Salomy could not take many walks because of the automobiles on the road.

Yet the chief worry which had crept

stealthily into Benny's consciousness was the increasing frequency of Alec Winston's visits. Benny was no fool. He knew that Winston was not hanging around merely because he was interested in Russian wolfhounds. And as the weeks drifted on, doubts and fears began to point scornful fingers at Benny in the dark corridors of his brain. His old buoyant spirit sagged. The new house with its austere servants was not a proper setting for his curbstone comedy. Flo had said as much on more than one occasion. Could he have mingled more often with his old companions he might have been happier, perhaps, but Flo had been very definite in banishing everyone and everything associated with their former humble existence.

Benny moved quietly around the place, more often with his dog than with his wife: not like a lord of the domain, but like a timid guest at a house party. He felt himself a stranger in an alien land. And hanging over him always was the handsome, debonair shadow of Alec Winston.

Chapter 8

ON A Saturday in August the tide in the affairs of Benny Darrell and Flo Sloane rose to a flood that, when it receded, left some rather startling changes along the coast line of their lives.

Early in the afternoon Lady Margaret Thrace arrived by taxi from Southampton, bearing a traveling case and a large paper-

wrapped parcel. She was a sturdy, platinum-haired woman in the uncertain forties; not beautiful, but blessed with a healthy British complexion and twinkling gray eyes; and she dressed in the mode of Paris rather than of London.

Whenever Flo wished to secure Lady Margaret's presence at a party or over a week-end she shrewdly offered an inducement of business. A demand for new shades for certain lights or a different arrangement of rugs would bring the noble business woman down from town, and she would be amply paid for her services. To-day she walked into the spacious, airy living room, with its comfortable English furniture and gay chintzes, Beecham following ponderously, carrying her paper-wrapped parcel.

Lady Margaret paused to glance about the room. It pleased her. She had a theory that plenty of lights, mirrors, and fresh flowers make any room attractive. From an open window sounded merry voices from the swimming pool.

"Is Mrs. Darrell about?" asked Lady Margaret.

"They're all down at the swimming pool,'" answered Beecham wheezily. "Shall I inform Mrs. Darrell that you are here, my lady?"

"I'll find her myself. Would you mind untying that bundle?"

"Certainly, my lady." Beecham, with a great rustling of paper, opened the package, disclosing three large, colored pillows. "If I may say so, my lady, they are very picturesque."

"Thank you, Beecham." Lady Margaret took the blue pillow and placed it on a wide divan.

Beecham held up the orange pillow. "This one, my lady," said he, "is particularly picturesque."

Lady Margaret looked at him. "Have you been drinking, Beecham?"

He appeared absurdly startled. "Beg pardon, my lady?"

"It's all right—I'm not a constable." Lady Margaret put the other pillows in

place, patted them, and stood off to admire the effect. "There! The room seems about right, now."

"Tea, my lady?" inquired Beecham.

"I shall wait for cocktails."

"Very good, my lady. I have sent your luggage up to the Yellow Room."

"Thank you." Lady Margaret walked briskly out into the hall.

Finding himself alone, Beecham marched across to the long table by the fireplace. On it lay rows of magazines with bright covers, and a tray holding a bottle of Scotch, some soda bottles, glasses, and ice. Beecham, with sacerdotal manner, poured himself a stiff drink, and, after a cautious glance in all directions, tossed it off neat. After which he shook his white cuffs into place, became once more the perfect English butler, and quitted the room with solemn tread.

A step on the flagged terrace, and Flo came in, followed by Alec Winston. She wore, under a gay green cape, a swimming suit of pale blue silk, molded to her superb body.

"I'll find you a cigarette," she said, and crossed to the table. When she had picked up the blue shagreen cigarette box and turned to him, he was taking a cigarette from his own gold case.

"Why," exclaimed Flo, "you had one all the time!"

"It's nice to see you alone for once." Winston smiled with all his cool assurance and walked over close to her. "I never get a chance to really see you--there's always a lot of people around."

"I don't think you've any cause to complain." Her blue eyes smiled up at him.

"I have reason to complain," he said, "every time I remember you're married."

"Suppose"— her voice was softer—"suppose I weren't?"

"I wish to God you weren't." He spoke lightly, yet there was in his expression something that caused Flo to lower her eyes. He took her hand and drew her gently toward him.

"Not here!" she breathed sharply.

"Where, then?"

"Is this," she demanded, "a habit with you?"

"You are." And then, in his best Don Juan manner, he said: "Do you want me to go away?"

"If you want to." Flo shrugged.

"When I go away I want you to go with me."

It was the first time in the months she had known him that he had dared to speak this way. Flo was very calm. She looked up at him quizzically. "I wonder what you'd do if——"

"If what?"

"Let's not be so serious." She withdrew her hand, and turned away.

"I beg your pardon." Annoyed, Winston lighted a cigarette.

"Oh, don't be silly, Alec!"

"I don't want to intrude," he said, "if you're content with things as they are."

And rather reminiscently Flo said: "We've come a long way together, Benny and I." One slender arm gestured gracefully

to include the room. "I couldn't have got all this myself."

"You could have got a lot more."

"Myself?" She smiled.

"You can have anything you want."

"Oh!" She stretched her arms high over her head. The cape fell aside, and Winston watched the delicate swell of her breasts. "I want so much!"

He came closer to her. "There are so many things I'd like to do for you—if you'll only let me."

"You're a dear, Alec." Her eyes were very gentle now.

Winston took her hand. "I'm really mad about you, you know."

At this moment Lady Margaret Thrace walked into the room. "Thank God!" she said briskly. "Just in time to avert a scandal!"

Flo drew away from Winston quickly. "Why, Lady Margaret—no one told me you were here!" Her smiling composure was admirable. "I've been expecting you all afternoon."

"Well, Alec"— the Englishwoman turned to him—"*you* don't seem bubbling over with welcome."

"My face," said Winston, "doesn't express my better nature."

"Have you a better nature?" Lady Margaret inquired sweetly.

"I'm told we all have." And with a studied nonchalance he sauntered out upon the terrace and vanished.

Lady Margaret looked Flo squarely in the eye. "You two are not being silly, are you?"

"Of course not!" Flo was slightly disconcerted. Then she discovered the pillows. "Oh, you've brought the new pillows—they *are* pretty!" she exclaimed. "*Très chic.*" Nowadays she frequently embellished her conversation with French phrases. "I'm so glad you could come down for the week-end."

"I'd have gotten here sooner," said Lady Margaret, "but I stopped at Rita Eliot's, in Southampton. She's given me the commission to do her house over."

"Oh!" Flo's eyes brightened. "*The* Rita Eliot?"

"In person."

"I've often read about her," said Flo, "but I've never met her."

"You will," said Lady Margaret, "in about three minutes."

Astonishment and delight in Flo's expression. "Really?"

"She's very anxious to see what I've done with this house, and I've asked her to take a look at it. Do you mind?"

"My goodness. I'm terrible pleased. I mean——"

"She's bringing Henry Henry along."

"You don't mean Henry *Henry* Henry III!"

"All of it," nodded Lady Margaret crisply. "His passion is interior decorating, you know, and I'm perfectly sure he wears lace on his underclothes."

"Oh, I *must* hurry and dress!" Flo was visibly excited.

"I," said Lady Margaret, "shall go out and say hello to your very charming husband."

Outside, automobile tires crunched on the gravel driveway.

"That must be them—*they*, I mean." Flo ran toward the door. "I'll hurry——"

"Never rush, my dear," said Lady Margaret. "The first rule of polite society is to keep people waiting. There are no other rules."

Flo laughed uncertainly. "Oh—I never know when you're joking!" And she was gone.

Lady Margaret picked up her sunshade and strolled out on the terrace.

From the hallway a woman's voice, pleasant and slightly husky, said: "So this is where they live."

And a man's voice, more gentle than hers, said: "This hall is altogether too baroque."

Rita Eliot came in then, and at her heels, Henry Henry. Rita Eliot possessed a vivid, healthy beauty and a distinction of manner. She dressed always in sports clothes. Her hair was of that splendid color which men, because they have found no better word for it, call ash blonde; and from her sun-

browned face very light blue eyes looked out humorously upon the world. She was not yet thirty, and she had never married. Last season her engagement to Alexander Winston had been rumored but not announced; and soon afterward she had gone to the Orient with her father, a former ambassador to Portugal.

Henry Henry, who was tall and grotesquely thin, moved nimbly about the room, examining furniture and *objets d'art* with the sniffing air of a terrier. His eyes were sharp, his nose sharper, his mustache a mere wisp; and he walked with a fluttery feminine grace.

Beecham, the butler, who had shown them in, stood pompously in the doorway.

"Is anyone at home?" inquired Rita Eliot.

"They are all out by the swimming pool, miss," Beecham replied.

"I loathe swimming pools!" cried Henry Henry. "Let's not go down—they always splash water on one." Then he looked fixedly at Beecham, as if inspecting an an-

tique. "Where," he demanded, "have I seen you before?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"H'm. I know I've seen you somewhere. . . ."

"Shall I inform Mrs. Darrell, miss, that you are here?" asked Beecham stiffly.

"I'm looking for Lady Margaret Thrace," said Rita Eliot.

"Very good, miss." Beecham took himself off.

"That man's face," said Henry Henry, "is very familiar."

"At least his manner isn't. And that's unusual for servants nowadays," said she. "But I'm curious to see the mistress of the house—and her consort. I've heard such extraordinary things about them. Weren't they quite unknown vaudeville dancers until a little while ago?"

"If you *will* stay abroad for a year, how can you hope to know what's going on! My dear, they're the talk of the town. People have taken them up." Henry Henry shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Those

people, I mean, who like to know actresses. Of course, *I* haven't met them."

"Have you a cigarette?" Rita Eliot picked up the blue shagreen box from the table and put it down. "These are gold-tipped."

"I was sure they would be. Here." He thrust forward a paper packet of cheap cigarettes.

"Thank God," smiled Rita Eliot, taking one, "there are a few strong men left who can still walk a mile for my favorite brand." She flicked a gold lighter and sighed in a cloud of smoke.

"Maggie's done this place rather well," said he, and went on examining the room critically.

Rita Eliot looked at a large photograph of Flo, framed in silver. "I wonder what she's like—when she isn't dancing. . . ."

"She must have something," sniffed Henry Henry, "or Alec wouldn't spend all his time trotting around after her!"

"Don't be a cat, Henry." Rita Eliot turned away from the photograph.

"Here's Maggie now!" exclaimed Henry Henry. "Hello, Maggie!"

Lady Margaret Thrace entered from the terrace. "Why didn't you come down to the pool?" she asked. "Benny was performing."

"And who," asked Rita Eliot, "is Benny?"

"Benny Darrell—the most divine man. He had his ukulele, and he sang an extraordinary ballad—one of your early American folk songs, I believe—about two lovers. 'Frankie and Johnny,' it's called."

"Charming." Rita Eliot smiled.

And Henry Henry asked: "When are we going to meet the acrobats?"

"What a snob you are, Henry!" reproved Lady Margaret. "Isn't it curious, I never met real snobs until I came to your democratic country."

Then Flo came in, looking very lovely, in a flowered chiffon frock. Lady Margaret introduced them. Flo's manner, in the presence of the socially great, was always a trifle eager. She was, she said, *so* glad to meet Miss Eliot. *And* Mr. Henry.

"I've heard Lady Margaret speak of you, Mr. Henry."

"Everyone speaks of Henry," Lady Margaret said. "If they don't, *he* will."

"Oh, don't be so brutal, Maggie!" retorted that young man.

"Lady Margaret has done our house beautifully, don't you think?" ventured Flo.

"Yes. I want to see it all," said Rita Eliot.

Flo envied her cool composure. These people were all so sure of themselves. . . .

"I want you to see Mrs. Darrell's bedroom," said Lady Margaret. "It's divine, if I do say so. Come along, I'll show it to you now. You don't mind, my dear?"

"Oh, no, *indeed*," asserted Flo, smiling. "There's never anything private about an actress's bedroom!"

Rita Eliot watched her with interest. Flo was pretty, and there was an airy grace about her; but she was acting. Her "social" manner and her accent were slightly spurious; she was pretending to be something she

was not. Rather a pity, thought Rita Eliot.

As they moved toward the door Benny, in flannels and a blazer, burst in from the terrace, whistling.

"Oh, excuse *me!*" he exclaimed, halting suddenly at the sight of strangers. "I didn't know there was anybody here." He turned to make a hasty exit.

"Benny," commanded Lady Margaret, "come here, my dear. Do you know Miss Eliot?"

"How are ya, Miss Eliot!" He came forward with a friendly smile.

Rita Eliot liked him at once.

"And Mr. Henry Henry," continued Lady Margaret.

"How d'you do?" murmured Henry Henry in a tired voice.

"I didn't get the names," said Benny.

"His full name, to be exact," said Lady Margaret, "is Henry Henry Henry."

"Yeh?" Benny's smile was luminous. "Henry Henry Henry. Well, whatta ya know about that! They couldn't stop namin' ya, could they? It's like that singer,

John Charles Thomas—they couldn't think of a last name for him, neither!"

Lady Margaret and Rita Eliot laughed delightedly. Flo was annoyed. Benny would never learn manners. . . .

"Too bad ya didn't get here sooner, an' come down t' the pool," Benny told them. "The whole of Long Island was here—all fightin' t' get into the water at once. Looked like the Fourth of July at Coney. If business gets any better we'll hafta hire a couple of lifeguards."

This time Henry Henry's shrill falsetto joined in the laughter. Flo, alone, was not amused.

"I told you he was divine," Lady Margaret said.

Rita Eliot had apparently discovered it for herself. The Broadway type was unfamiliar to her, and she found this slim, handsome dancer refreshing, even fascinating. He was so naïvely and completely himself.

"Lady Margaret," said Flo, in her best drawing-room manner, "is taking them on

a personally conducted tour of the house."

"Yeh?" Benny beamed. "How d'ya like the old homestead, anyhow?"

Rita Eliot told him that she liked it.

"Maggie," said Henry Henry with a delicate gesture, "I like everything but those curtains. They're too baroque for the *tout ensemble*."

"I never noticed it before," grinned Benny, winking at Lady Margaret.

"Do you think so, Henry?" said Lady Margaret.

"I don't like them, Maggie. I'm sorry—I simply *don't like* them."

"Well," suggested Benny hospitably, "we'll have 'em taken right down."

Rita Eliot's low laughter was applause to Benny. Flo frowned at him.

"Come along, children," said Lady Margaret, "I'll show you the rest of the house."

"We're going up," Henry Henry told Benny, "to have a look at your wife's bedroom!"

"Take me," said Benny. "I'd like to see it, myself!"

Henry Henry uttered a cackling laugh, and pranced out of the room after Lady Margaret.

Benny turned to Rita Eliot. "Where'd ya get the cave man?"

Rita laughed. She was rapidly becoming his best audience.

"Who's boy friend is he?" Benny inquired.

"Don't exaggerate," said Rita Eliot. And with a gracious smile which included both of them, she followed the others out into the hall.

Flo faced him with an expression of annoyance. "You're impossible," she told him.

"Who—me?"

"And will you *please* stop saying, 'Who—me?'"

"All right, Flo. If it's out with you, it's out with me."

"How many times," she sighed, "have I asked you not to call me Flo?"

"I didn't mean t' insult ya with it, Baby. I been callin' ya that for years."

"My name is Fleurette."

"O. K. Ya can call yourself Mary Garden —but ya'll still be Mamma to me!" He smiled at her affectionately. "Say, listen —d'ya know what day it is to-day?"

"You were very rude to those people," she said sternly.

"Who—me?"

"How *could* you say what you did to Mr. Henry—about his name?"

"What did *I* say?" Benny's eyes were wide with innocence. "Ya gotta admit it was a shock, though. Suppose my name was Benny Benny Benny—I'd expect to get a laugh on it."

More in sorrow than in anger, Flo sighed. "Why are you so vulgar?"

"Well," grinned Benny, "ya knew that when ya married me."

"Oh, let's not go back to *that!*" She moved restlessly across to the open French window. "Things are entirely different now. We've progressed. We're not the same people. At least—I'm not."

Benny regarded her gravely. "Y'ain't takin' this crowd too serious, are ya?"

"Oh, you don't understand."

"Well, I'll tell ya what I *do* understand." He walked over to her. "This society bunch is makin' an awful hole in the old bank account. Ya know, we ain't had nothin' comin' in since the show closed—that's two months, now. An' we won't be workin' again for another month—an' we ain't signed the new contracts, at that."

"LeGrand is twice as anxious to sign that contract as we are. We can get anything we want from him."

"Listen, Honey—I thought we took this place for a rest. But ya been workin' so hard havin' a rest that ya'll be all tired out when it comes time t' go back on the job. Ya know—we gotta give 'em some new steps next season. I got plenty of ideas in my head, but I can't get ya to practise. We used to practise three hours a day—an' you've only gave me twenty minutes in three weeks."

"I'm tired of working," she said.

"But you're workin' harder here than ya do on the floor."

"It's good advertising to know these

people. Every time I have my picture in the paper, watching the polo with Lady Margaret—or showing my wolfhounds at the dog show, it's worth money to us. You can't buy that kind of advertising. It draws crowds to see us at the Club."

"That's a lot of popcorn," argued Benny. "The only thing that draws crowds to the Club is what *we* have on the floor an' what *they* have on the hip. An' the competition's terrible!"

"We've got a big following," said Flo.

"Yeh—on the first of the month!"

"Oh, you're hopeless."

"I'm sorry, Mamma."

She turned to say something sharp to him. He put up a defensive hand and grinned.

"Ya wouldn't hit a cripple, would ya?"

Flo's expression softened.

"I'm afraid," she sighed, "this isn't your kind of life, Benny."

"Well, I wouldn't say that. I like t' see ya have a good time. Ya know *me*, kid. If ya like this racket, it's O. K. with me. Only, don't forget we're gonna hafta go back on

the job sooner'n we figgered. An' speakin' of forgettin'—didja forget what day this is?"

"Why," said Flo, "it's Saturday, isn't it?"

"Sure—it's Saturday of this week. But what *day* is it?"

And as Flo looked puzzled he added mournfully: "Whatta ya know about that! I'm the first guy in history t' remember his wedding anniversary—an' this is what I get!"

"Oh—of course!" Flo's lovely eyes lighted. "I didn't forget it."

"No, ya didn't forget it—ya just didn't remember it." He took a large blue leather jewel case from his pocket and presented it to her with a comic flourish. "The first prize—a handsome gold watch an' chain. There y'are, Baby—from me to you!"

"Oh, Benny!" she exclaimed. "How sweet of you! What is it?"

"Go on—open it up—don't be afraid," he grinned eagerly.

Flo opened the case. On the blue velvet nestled a large, lurid gold brooch, sparkling

with small diamonds: the sort of ornament a circus performer might have revelled in.

"Oh, Benny!" She stared down in soft horror at the vulgarity of it.

"Glad ya like it, Baby." He was exuberantly pleased. "At the joolry store where I got it—corner of Broadway and Fifty-first—the fella told me it's the latest thing from Paris."

"It's—" Flo gulped—"it's very—pretty."

"Set me back plenty of nickels. But you know me, Honey—nothin' too good for the little woman!"

As she stood holding the gaudy gift in her hand, wondering how she could keep him from sensing her disappointment—and he beside her, believing that he had made her supremely happy—Alec Winston walked in from the terrace.

"Hello," said he, cool and debonair.

"H-hello." Flo made a quick movement to hide the jewel case, but Winston discovered it and walking over to her, playfully took it from her hand. "Aha!" he exclaimed. "What's this?" He held the brooch up to

the light, sparkling its myriad small diamonds. "Are you planning a masquerade costume?"

"No." Flo was embarrassed.

"This is magnificent," laughed Winston. "Where'd you get it—at the ten-cent store?"

"Benny gave it to me," she said in a queer voice—and was ashamed of her shame.

And in that instant Benny realized that his present was hopelessly vulgar. He turned away with a hurt expression. "Yeh," he muttered, "ya're right. I got it at the ten-cent store—just for a joke."

"Oh, Benny," she exclaimed. "I think it's lovely!"

"That's all right, dear," said Benny. "Excuse me, will ya—I—I gotta see if the cook's fed Salomy." And he hurried out of the room.

Chapter 9

"I'M SORRY," Winston told her. "I'm afraid I hurt his feelings."

"I'm afraid you did." With a sigh Flo laid the jewel case on the table. "Poor Benny. He means well."

"I expect he paid rather a lot for it," Winston said. "Isn't it extraordinary—he hasn't any taste, and you have so much."

"Do you think I have?"

"How curious it is—the men you attractive women marry."

"Perhaps it's because you attractive men are so indefinite." She enjoyed these mildly daring skirmishes with him.

"Do encourage me, my dear." He smiled. "I need it."

"I didn't mean to suggest that you were timid," said Flo. "You know, you were very naughty last night at the Club—someone might have seen us."

"Suppose they had? A kiss means nothing nowadays."

"Then why bother?" Her decorative nose tilted upward a few points.

"Well," said Winston casually, "I thought women rather expected it. You're the first one I've ever known who objected—and meant it."

"You're so spoiled!" said Flo. "Perhaps that's why a kiss means nothing to you."

"But we never know when one will. That's half the excitement of living."

"I'm a married woman," she reminded him, with unexpected primness.

"There's a fine 1893 point of view," he laughed softly. Then his eyes became very grave. "It's all wrong, my dear."

"You mean—you and me?"

"I mean—you and *he*. I know I sound like a frightful cad saying so, but I can't help it—it's the truth. After all, he's just a vaudeville hoofer—and he'll never be anything else. You were meant for something better." He took her hand. "You're not happy—and you know it."

"Oh, I don't——"

"I'll bet you anything you like—a diamond bracelet, for example—I heard you say you needed another—that you won't stay with him six months."

"You mustn't say such things!" She drew her hand away sharply. But her eyes were thoughtful.

In the past few weeks Winston's attitude toward her had changed. He had found her a difficult subject, so strongly was she imbued with what he called "middle-class morality."

Of late his gay impertinence had given way to a more intimate seriousness when they were alone.

"It's inevitable," he continued. "Poor old Benny's not your sort."

From the hallway came Rita Eliot's voice and a shrill exclamation from Henry Henry.

Winston turned quickly, frowning. "Are there people here?"

"Oh," said Flo, "I forgot to tell you——"

She was interrupted by the entrance of Lady Margaret and the others.

"Hello, Alec." Rita Eliot's eyes smiled mockingly. "What a surprise to find *you* here. Were you here when we arrived?"

"He was probably hiding in the laundry basket!" cried Henry Henry. "That's where they always hide them in plays!"

Winston's expression, for a few seconds, betrayed embarrassment. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I just came in this minute."

Rita Eliot turned to Flo. "What a nice house you have," she said graciously.

"Oh, I'm so glad you like it."

"It's charming. I hope Lady Margaret

can work the same miracles with my disreputable old house."

"I can, indeed," smiled Lady Margaret, the business woman.

"You *ought* to work miracles, Maggie," said Henry Henry, "you *charge* enough, God knows!"

"Professional jealousy," Lady Margaret retorted.

"It's five o'clock." Rita Eliot glanced at her watch. "I must be running along."

"Aren't you going to give us tea, my dear?" Lady Margaret asked Flo.

"Oh, of *course!*" exclaimed Flo. "Won't you stay and have a cocktail—Miss Eliot?"

"I'm not drinking, thank you," answered Rita.

"Some tea, then? Oh, *do* stay." Flo's voice was overeager.

"Must you hurry, darling?" said Lady Margaret, seating herself.

"Well——"

"It won't take a minute!" Flo rushed off to ring for Beecham.

Rita sauntered across to Winston. "I've

been told your car was always parked here." Her smile was gently ironic. "She *is* attractive, of course. But what does your mamma say?"

"What on earth do you mean?" Winston looked very much annoyed. "I come here because it's amusing."

Across the room Flo was punching the bell for the seventh time. "Really!" she exclaimed. "The more servants one has, the less service one gets!"

A trim French maid passed in the hall. Flo called to her: "Céleste!" And then, in a somewhat doubtful French: "*S'il vous plaît* tell Beecham—*apporter* tea *et* cocktails—*et les petites*—you know—*canapes*. Toot sweet."

"Yes, ma'am." And Céleste disappeared.

"I don't wonder you're amused here," said Rita Eliot.

"Look here, my dear," began Winston in a low voice, "I give you my word——"

"Oh, please don't." Rita Eliot laughed. "You gave it to me once before!"

Flo sat down by Lady Margaret and

Henry Henry, and, perhaps to demonstrate her subjection of Winston, called across to him: "Oh, Alec, will you bring me a cigarette?"

"Certainly," he murmured, and brought the blue shagreen box over to her. The others each took one of the gold-tipped cigarettes.

"Oh, these are very elegant," said Henry Henry. "What kind are they?" He squinted at the label. "*Darrell and Sloane.* I never heard of that brand. Oh, of course!—that's your professional name, isn't it! What a unique idea. Look, Rita—they have their own names printed on their cigarettes!"

"Oh, that—that was my husband's idea." Flo blushed with chagrin. What would these people think of her?

Rita Eliot said: "I think your husband is a darling. But I'm afraid he doesn't like us—he seems to have vanished completely."

And Benny came in, then. Some of the exuberant gaiety seemed to have gone out of his manner.

"We were just asking for you," said Lady Margaret.

"Right on the cue," he smiled. "Well, folks—all through lookin' over the drum?"

"I beg your pardon?" Henry Henry's eyebrows lifted.

"The drum. That's what Joe Ricketts calls a house. You know Joe Ricketts——"

"—The Ricketts of Philadelphia?"

"No—Ricketts of the Follies," said Benny. "The Tramp Comedian."

"I'm sure they don't know him," put in Flo hastily. "Can't we——"

"Do tell us about Joe Ricketts," said Rita Eliot.

Flo gave him a warning glance, but Benny, encouraged by Rita Eliot's friendly eyes, went on:

"Well, I knew Joe when he was playin' four shows a day—sometimes five—on the Gus Sun time. He used to panic 'em even in them—*those*—days. Then he makes his big hit in the Follies, an' pretty soon he's pullin' down twenty-five hundred a week. Well, right away, see—he buys a swell drum in Great Neck, an'——"

"Really," interrupted Flo, annoyed, "that story is much too——"

"Oh, do go on," urged Rita Eliot.

"Well," continued Benny, "it's funny the way success hits people sometimes. But it never changed Joe. He was just the same. There was three or four of his old pals that was down an' out—song-an'-dance men, fellas he'd known in his old burlesque days, an' he gives 'em all jobs around the house. One of 'em's the sho-fer, a couple of 'em he dresses up like butlers, an' another, that has t.b., he puts to work outdoors as a gardener. Well, I went down with Joe an' the missus one night, an' a couple of butlers let us in, an' they both says, 'Hello, Joe,' an' he says, 'Hi, boys.' Well, come dinner time, we went out t' the table, I an' Joe an' the missus, an' the sho-fer he joined us, too, an' after the butlers had served the table, *they* sat down with us. After dinner we was all sittin' around, talkin', an' Mrs. Ricketts brings out a toothpick.

"'Now, listen, Mamma,' Joe says, 'I wish ya wouldn't use a toothpick at the table—

it's vulgar.' An' the sho-fer pipes up an' says, 'That's what I been tellin' this broad fer a year!'"

The others—all save Flo and Winston—broke into peals of laughter.

"Divine!" cried Lady Margaret.

And Rita Eliot said: "Oh, I should love to dine with the Ricketts!"

"Stick around," grinned Benny. "Maybe I can fix it for ya t' meet 'em socially!"

Flo's embarrassment was all too apparent. These people, whom she had always yearned to know, were, she felt, laughing at Benny. She did not understand that they were liking Benny immensely because he was—just what he was.

"Alec and I," she remarked, "by way of changing the subject, "are going over to Mrs. Paget-Gadget's to-morrow to meet the Prince."

"That Prince Hoozis, or whatever his name is?" Benny asked.

"Prince Adolf of Essenstein-Schlossberg," she answered somewhat sharply.

"Ya know"— Benny turned to the others

—"it's funny. When we was in vaud-a-ville there was always a couple of foreign acts on the bill—an' ya couldn't get Flo—er—Fleurette here—t' speak t' any of 'em. She wouldn't look at a foreigner. But now they can't come foreign enough for 'er."

Flo frowned at him. Then she was relieved by the entrance of the liveried footman and a parlormaid with tea things and the cocktail tray. But where was Beecham? She had always taken such pride in Beecham's pontifical manner in presiding at tea. She asked the footman where Beecham was.

"He's out picking tomatoes, madam," replied the footman.

That was odd, Flo thought, a butler picking tomatoes in the middle of the afternoon.

"Well," observed Benny, "that's the first useful thing he's done since he's been on the pay roll."

"Shall we have tea on the terrace?" Flo suggested quickly. "It's so much cooler." And forthwith led the way, the others following leisurely.

Benny lingered behind with Lady Margaret.

"Aren't *you* coming?" Henry Henry beamed at him.

"Who—me?" Benny shook his head. "T' tell the truth I ain't very handy jugglin' a teacup. The hired help begun complainin' of the breakage, an' I had t' give it up."

"Oh, you *kill* me!" chortled Henry Henry, and scampered out upon the terrace.

Benny looked after him. "Why," he asked Lady Margaret, "do you women go around with those funny guys?"

Lady Margaret laughed. "Well," she replied crisply, "first of all—he never bores us by making love to us; he dances divinely; and if we want a button sewed on, he can do it."

"Gee," mused Benny, "even a bird like that gets along better'n *I* do." His expression was wistful. "Lady Margaret," he said slowly, "you been awful nice t' me—you're not like the rest of this mob—I can talk t' you. Listen—will ya tell me something? What's the answer?"

"The answer to what, Benny?"

"This merry-go-round," he said. "Ya can see the layout. I'm always doin' the wrong thing. I don't belong. That's all—I just don't belong."

"Why, my dear——"

"No use kiddin' me—I don't fit in this society racket, an' I never will. I try hard—but—it don't seem t' be in the cards." He paused and stared somberly off into space. "Lady Margaret, whatta ya think is gonna happen t' Flo an' me? She—she's gettin' away from me. I can see it. Oh, I ain't criticizin' Flo—she's young—an' she's been listenin' t' a lot of flattery. I guess maybe it's gone t' her head."

"Yes," Lady Margaret answered quietly. "I know what you mean."

"Yeh." He looked at her. "What about this fella, Winston?"

"Oh, I don't think——"

"Listen—he's always around. An' he's a swell—he's got what she wants. Ya don't think—ya don't think she's fell for 'im?"

"I think," Lady Margaret said, "she's very fond of you."

"She used t' be." His dark eyes were troubled. "But lately—gee, I dunno. It's got me worried."

"Perhaps Fleurette is too ambitious."

"Well, I don't wanta stand in 'er way. Why, I'd do anything in the world for 'er."

"Possibly you've done too much for her already. That's the trouble with you American husbands—you're so kind to your wives that they lose interest in you. Perhaps Fleurette doesn't appreciate your good qualities. Do you—" Lady Margaret's eyes twinkled—"do you ever beat her?"

"My God—no!" gasped Benny.

"You should try it some time. It might work, you know."

"Gee, you're a sketch!" Benny laughed.

"Then, of course, there's the jealousy motive. I'm told that's very successful."

"Listen," protested Benny, "I couldn't make love to another woman—I'd laugh!"

Flo came hurrying in. "Lady Margaret,"

she said in an excited whisper, "I've just thought of a wonderful idea. Do you suppose Miss Eliot and Mr. Henry would come for dinner to-night? I think it would be too marvelous if they would!"

"Well, why don't you ask them?"

"I—I did. That is, I suggested it, but they said they had other engagements. So I thought if *you* would ask them, they might change their plans. *Would* you? Oh, I'm *so* anxious to have them."

Lady Margaret glanced slyly at Benny. He shook his head.

"Do you want them so much?" she asked Flo.

"Yes—terribly. Please ask them. Alec is coming anyway, and——"

"Oh?" Lady Margaret's eyes brightened. "You say Alec is coming?"

"Yes, I asked him yesterday."

"Sure, he boards here," put in Benny. "That guy ain't bought a meal since I had money."

Flo rewarded him with a dark look. Then: "Please ask them, Lady Margaret."

"Yes," nodded Lady Margaret. "I think it's an excellent idea."

"Oh, you're an angel!" exclaimed Flo. And as Lady Margaret left them, she turned on Benny. "Why," she demanded with annoyance, "must you always be so unrefined?"

"Hey—just a minute!" His expression was comic in its grimness. "You listen t' *me* for once!" He walked closer to her. "You don't appreciate my good qualities."

"*What?*" Flo was startled.

"I've done too much for ya already," he rushed on, trying to remember Lady Margaret's words. "That's the trouble with us American husbands—we're so kind to our wives that they lose interest in us. How would ya like a good sock on the nose?"

Flo stared at him, aghast. Then she tossed her head. "Don't be *ridiculous!*" And walked away from him.

Benny sat down abruptly. It didn't work.

"Flo," called Lady Margaret from the open French window, "you're having guests for dinner. D'you mind?"

"Oh, you *are* an angel!" Flo blew her a kiss.

Lady Margaret rejoined the others on the terrace. With a radiant smile Flo rushed across the room and rang the bell.

"I must get Higgins on the telephone," she soliloquized. (Higgins was their press agent.) "He can notify the society editors of the newspapers that I am entertaining Rita Eliot to-night. . . . And with Lady Margaret and Mr. Henry and Alec—it makes a *very* smart crowd. . . ."

After a moment Beecham came in. His face was unusually florid, but Flo decided that it must have come from picking tomatoes in the sun. He did not approach close to her, so she could not scent his breath, which was redolent of spirits.

"Beecham," said Flo, "I'm having three extra for dinner. I want the finest dinner you can get up—the very finest. Lots of flowers—plenty of the vintage champagne—just like the dinners you used to serve when you were with the best families. You understand?"

"Yes, madam," said Beecham hollowly.

"Hurry, now—you haven't much time, and there's a lot to arrange. I don't want anything to go wrong. This will be the most important dinner I've ever given—and I'm depending on you."

"Very good, madam." Beecham wheeled and with ponderous dignity marched out.

Flo turned to Benny, who sat slumped in a chair. "I hope you were listening," she said.

"Who—me?" He looked up vaguely.

"I said, this is going to be *the* party of my life. My whole future depends on it."

"Your whole *future*——"

"Socially, I mean. Rita Eliot is the most important woman in Southampton. It'll mean *everything* to me to know her—to entertain her here. I don't expect any help from you," she added, more gently, "but I'll be grateful if you'll just put on the soft pedal. See that you don't spoil everything. I've *got* to put this dinner over!"

The others were coming in from the terrace.

Flo leaned toward him with a final warning gesture, and whispered: "Remember—no vulgarity!"

"We find we can dine with you, after all," said Rita Eliot.

"I'm so pleased," Flo told them.

"I," said Henry Henry, "was to gladden the heart of the unsinkable Mrs. Plew at dinner—but I'll send word I've got scarlet fever."

Flo had often heard of that puissant grande dame, the unsinkable Mrs. Plew, who had survived three ocean disasters. To hear her thus spoken of so intimately was thrilling.

"What time do you dine?" asked Winston casually.

"Tell them seven," said Lady Margaret, "so that they'll be here by eight."

"I'm *so* happy you can come," Flo told them once more.

"We must be rolling now," said Rita Eliot. "Come along, Henry."

At this moment they were all startled by the sight of Frederick, the footman, backing through the hallway, expostulating:

"But—if you'll just wait——"

And a coarse voice protested: "Hey, what's the big idea—keepin' a friend of the family waitin' in the hall!"

Whereupon Lew Lewis and Peggy Page, each carrying a suitcase, pushed past Frederick the footman into the room.

"Well!" exclaimed Benny joyously. "Look who's here!"

Flo appeared about to faint. Her fashionable guests seemed somewhat puzzled.

"This guy in the fancy costume," said Lew, with an aggrieved glance at Frederick, "tried t' scare us away!"

There was an instant's awkward pause, and blonde, wide-eyed Peggy Page called out: "Hello, Flo! You look as if you didn't expect us!"

Flo, like a stricken creature, murmured something unintelligible, and Benny said: "Why, sure—sure."

"Didn't Benny tell you he invited us down for your anniversary dinner?" asked Peggy, in her baby-talk voice.

Benny turned with a smile to Flo: "Y'see,

Honey, I was keepin' this as a surprise for ya!"

"Well," said Lew Lewis, pulling off his checked cap, "here we are. What time do we tear a herring?"

And Flo, moaning, "Oh, my God!" sank into a chair.

Chapter 10

TO FLO, that evening, which was to have been the crowning event of her life, would always remain a hideous nightmare. The ghostly contretemps of Lew Lewis's arrival with Peggy Page! A song writer and a cabaret singer—the ignominy of being forced to introduce them to such fashionable celebrities as Lady Margaret, Alec Winston,

Henry Henry, and, of all persons, Rita Eliot! It was too dreadful.

Never would she forget her embarrassment when Lew Lewis, upon being presented to Henry Henry Henry, said: "Gladda meet the three of ya!" At which everyone but Flo had laughed.

Of course, there was nothing to do but go through with it. Benny had invited them—she could not have them thrown out. But Lady Macbeth was not the only woman who has wanted to murder a house guest.

When Rita Eliot and the others departed to dress for dinner Flo fled to her room, where she locked the door, and, after a mild seizure of hysterics, occupied herself with smelling salts. She did not trust herself to speak to Benny. When she came down at eight o'clock, looking—despite her anguish of soul—extremely lovely in an ivory gown, she found Lady Margaret in the garden with Lew Lewis and Peggy Page. Peggy was arrayed in an ingénue's pink frock that might have been worn in the first act of any musical comedy; and Lew, in honor of the

occasion, had garbed himself in a tight-fitting dinner suit, very Broadway as to cut.

"Look me over," he greeted her. "I put on the old open-faced reefer for ya!"

Unfortunately for Flo, he was not as glumly pessimistic as usual; to-night he seemed almost gay. Flo swallowed her chagrin. No wonder Lady Margaret laughed at him. What would she think of her for having such friends?

"You look be-ootiful, Flo," gurgled Peggy Page.

"Thank you," said Flo, with restraint.

The other guests were arriving. She saw Benny escorting them across the terrace.

"What's that bimbo's name—again—the desprit character?" Lew asked.

Lady Margaret, with an amused twinkle, told him Henry's full name.

"Henry Henry Henry!" Lew repeated. "Sounds like a cry for help."

The others arrived in excellent spirits. Alec alone appeared subdued, but Flo was grateful for the glance of sympathy he gave her. *He* understood what she was suffering.

Benny, however, behaved as if nothing had gone wrong and seemed to be having the time of his life. Flo was highly nervous as cocktails were being served by Beecham and Frederick the footman. She heard Lew comment on, Frederick's mulberry livery, and then, indicating Beecham, ask in an audible whisper: "Who's the guy in civilian clothes?"

Beecham, Flo thought, appeared to be acting strangely. His face was very red, and his manner somewhat distrait. . . .

The high point of horror was reached during dinner. That Lew and Benny should have regaled the guests with vulgar anecdotes was bad enough—but Flo's despair touched bottom when she discovered that the butler was quite drunk. Nothing on the menu seemed right, and the service was so slow, so muddled, that Flo could scarcely repress a scream. In fact, she *did* scream once—a stifled little scream—when Beecham, lurching like a street-car conductor going around a curve, spilled a cold artichoke down her back.

"*I* know where I've seen that fellow before!" exclaimed Henry Henry, when Beecham had removed himself and the artichoke to the pantry. "He was my mother's butler one season at Lenox. He left us—by request—because the work interfered with his serious drinking."

Beecham was as drunk as a lord. To be sure, Flo had never seen a lord drunk, but she was content to believe that no lord could possibly be as drunk as Beecham. And she could have wept with mortification.

Oddly enough, her guests appeared to be enjoying the ill-fated dinner. That showed their fine breeding, Flo thought: they pretended not to notice the wretched service, the butler's inebriation, and the vulgarity of Benny's friends. Rita Eliot laughed a great deal—for all the world as if she were really having a delightful time.

"Flo," said Peggy Page, in her baby-talk voice, "this was certainly a grand dinner."

"Right," agreed Lew Lewis, producing a toothpick. "You sure put a mean bag on us."

"Bag?" queried Henry Henry.

"He means feed bag," Benny translated.

Henry Henry considered that very droll indeed.

At length the ordeal came to an end, and they repaired to the terrace for coffee and liqueurs. The night was very dark, and there were no stars. A damp wind, with a hint of approaching autumn in it, blew in from the sea. In the shadows of the terrace, Flo, sitting beside Winston, shuddered lightly.

"Shall I get you a wrap of some sort?" he asked.

"I think we'd better go in," she said.

Benny sat watching her. In the past few minutes all the gaiety seemed suddenly to have evaporated from his mood, and a vague melancholy came over him.

Rita Eliot's pleasant voice roused him: "A penny for your thoughts."

Benny forced a wan smile. "Gee—I guess I'd be overpaid, at that."

"I'm having a perfectly gorgeous time," she confided to him.

He liked her. She was a regular guy. He felt that she was sympathetic and that he might be able to talk to her. But to-night, somehow, he didn't feel like talking to anyone. The party had gone dead on him.

"I hear you're a song writer, Mr. Lewis." Lady Margaret's brisk voice.

"So they tell me," replied Lew.

And Benny spoke up in behalf of his friend: "You've all heard 'Bum-Bum-Boodle-Oo,' ain't you? That's his latest. Fifty million people can't go to sleep at night till they've heard it on the radio!"

"Won't you play it for us, Mr. Lewis?" asked Lady Margaret.

"Oh, do!" urged Henry Henry.

"Nix!" demurred Lew. "I can't play—I don't know one note from another."

"Irving Berlin's the same way," added Benny.

"But Mr. Berlin can play the piano," argued Rita Eliot. "I've heard him."

"So can Peggy, here." Benny took Peggy Page's hand. "Come on, let's go in an' warm up the piano."

There was a general exodus from the terrace. Benny led Peggy straight to the grand piano in the living room, and without any further coaxing she seated herself and rippled her fingers over the keys.

"This is one of Lew's biggest hits." And in a rich cabaret contralto, oddly in contrast to her baby-talk speaking voice, she sang, "Asbestos Mamma, Papa's Gonna Burn You Up."

The guests, seated comfortably around the room, applauded. Flo and Winston seemed not to have heard the song. Then Peggy sang "Bum-Bum-Boodle-Oo." And after that, "East Side Mammy o' Mine." Lady Margaret, Rita, and Henry Henry loved them all.

"Lay off my pieces," Lew protested with sudden modesty. "Give some of the other poor composers a chance."

"All right," said Peggy Page, and strummed a few sad chords. Then she sang simply, and with unexpected pathos, a song called, "I'm Losing You."

Benny sat there listening, staring wist-

fully across at Flo. For the words of the song told the premonition of tragedy that he felt in his own heart to-night.

The concert was interrupted by the entrance of Frederick, the footman. He crossed to Flo, bowed, and mumbled something. Flo rose nervously. As if the evening weren't dreadful enough without *this* happening! And before she could give Frederick any instructions two men in yachting clothes strolled in, quite as if it were a hotel lobby.

"How are ya, folks!" shouted B. B. Hummel, tossing his yachting cap on the table. "Well—here's a cozy little domestic scene—a moment in the private lives of the world's greatest dance team!"

And behind him Gus LeGrand's florid face was wreathed in smiles. They advanced with outstretched hands.

"Well, well," said Benny. "This is a surprise!"

And Flo could only murmur, "Yes. This *is* a surprise!"

Messrs. Hummel and LeGrand were presented to the rest of the party, and without

further ado made themselves quite at home, both smoking large cigars.

"We come down on Gus's yacht," the little booking agent informed everybody. "An' we was so near I says to Gus, 'Gus, while we're this near we might as well drop in on Benny an' Flo—ya know what I mean.'"

"I been coming all summer," put in LeGrand, "but somehow I never found the time." He glanced around with an appraising eye. "Nice place you got here."

"Everything's been fine up to now," said Lew.

Hummel glanced at Lew quickly, then winked at Lady Margaret, whom he had never seen before. "Always kiddin'—ya know what I mean!"

Lady Margaret and Rita Eliot were leaning forward with the same eagerness they might have displayed in looking at two unfamiliar fish in an aquarium.

"Somebody was singing when we come in," LeGrand remarked genially. "Don't let us interrupt the festivities."

"Oh, that's all right," said Peggy Page.

"Well, well, Peggy." B. B. Hummel beamed upon her. "I ain't seen you in a long time. Must of been twelve years——"

"Be yourself!" retorted Peggy. "I wasn't outa school twelve years ago!"

"Well, time flies, time flies," assented the booking agent. "It seems that long ago that I gotcha a contract t' sing illustrated songs up at the Bronx Alhambra—at eighteen a week. Remember that—eh?"

"I never worked for that little in my life!" denied Peggy heatedly.

A lively repartee followed. Flo felt shame burning her cheeks to think that her patrician guests should be insulted by the presence of such people!

"Alec," she said under her breath, "I've got to get out of this room or I'll faint!"

Benny had just arbitrated between Peggy and B. B. Hummel, and, peace reigning once more, Peggy began to play "Bum-Bum Boodle-Oo." Unobserved in the clatter of conversation, Flo and Winston slipped out of the room. In the hallway Flo drank a glass of water.

"I've never put in such a terrible evening." There were tears in her eyes. "Everything's gone wrong—and—and—if I have to go back in there I'll go mad!"

"Poor little girl." Winston patted her shoulder reassuringly. "You ought to relax for a few minutes. Let's go into the library—we'll never be missed."

"Do you think we dare?"

"Why not, my dear? Those people are all attempting to out-talk one another, and Rita and Henry are so pop-eyed trying not to miss a word that they won't notice we've gone."

So stormily rebellious was her mood that she clung to his hand and followed him into the library. Both doors and a French window stood open. Winston made a move to close them.

"No, please—I need the air!" Flo sank down among the pillows on the broad divan, and Winston seated himself beside her.

Flo had never cared for this library. In the first place, her reading was limited to newspapers and fashionable journals, and

she considered libraries in general a waste of space.

The handsomely bound books on the shelves had been selected by Lady Margaret. Flo had never felt that she belonged in this room, and to-night it seemed more alien than ever. She lay back among the pillows and closed her eyes. For the moment she was not conscious of Winston's shoulder touching hers. She was thinking only that Benny was ruining her life. Everything was a mess. . . .

From the room beyond came Peggy Page's cabaret voice, singing a love song with a throbbing melody. Winston leaned closer to her, and raised her hand to his lips.

"I adore you," he said gently.

"Do you?" She smiled, with her eyes closed. "I'm glad."

Of a sudden Winston jerked away from her. Startled, Flo opened her eyes. In the doorway stood Benny, a queer expression on his face. Flo was aware that she was frightened—and annoyed. Winston sat rigid.

Without a word Benny walked over to the

French window and closed it, and drew the curtains. Then he crossed to the door leading to the breakfast room, and closed that. Winston, his fists clenched, sat ready to spring to his feet and defend himself. Flo felt cold all over.

Then Benny paused and faced them with a strange, twisted smile.

"I didn't wantcha t' be in a draft," he said quietly—and went out, closing the hall door after him.

Flo felt Winston's sigh of relief. The crisis was past—yet both were still under a nervous spell of fear.

"That was damn queer," Winston muttered, stirring uneasily.

Resentment was taking the place of Flo's fright. This was just another outrage in the long list of Benny's social transgressions. She would never be able to make anything of him. Never! He was what he was—he could never rise above his vaudeville past and take his place with her in the world she aspired to. The situation was intolerable. . . .

"I know how unhappy you are," she

heard Winston saying. "You can't go on this way, my dear."

Flo did not reply. She lay back again among the pillows, aware of a faint headache. Alec *was* a dear. He understood. . . .

"You're like the princess in the tower," he said: "You're a prisoner here." And then, switching from fairy-tale legend, without the obvious mention of himself as the prince riding by to her rescue, he went on: "You ought to go abroad, travel. What a thrill you'll get, seeing Paris for the first time! I wish I could show it to you. And the Riviera—and Como. The romance of those places! We could have such a divine time together."

Flo rose with a restless gesture and took a few steps across the room. "I don't know how much longer I can stand it here," she said, as if to herself.

"There's no reason why you should." He got up and walked over to her, fumbling in his coat pocket for something. "You remember, this afternoon I bet you a bracelet that you wouldn't be with him in six

months. Well, I'm so sure of losing it that I want you to take this now."

She turned, in surprise. He was holding out an exquisite diamond and sapphire bracelet that winked and glittered in a million gay pin points of light. Flo had a passion for jewelry. And this was more beautiful than any of the bracelets she wore to-night.

"Oh, but I couldn't——"

"My dear," he said suavely, "don't be ridiculous. We made a bet—and I'm losing. There's no reason why I shouldn't pay it now. Why wait? It's perfectly all right."

And as he talked he clasped the bracelet round her wrist. The coruscating diamonds and sapphires held Flo's eyes fascinated.

"Oh, but I——"

The door opened and Benny came in. "Miss Eliot's ready to go home," he began. Winston abruptly dropped her hand. And Benny saw the bracelet. "Where'd ya get that?"

A swift, blinding rage seized Flo. "What

do you *mean*," she cried, "coming into the room this way, without knocking!"

"Knocking?" His face went gray. "My God—I'm your *husband!*"

Then he came toward her. "Who does that bracelet belong to?"

"You can't talk to me like that!" she flashed.

"I'm askin' ya."

"It's mine," Winston answered coolly. "We had a bet, and I——"

"Take it off 'er!"

"I told you it was a bet," Winston repeated. He was as tall as Benny and in splendid physical condition. Moreover, he had contempt for husbands in general. But there was a dangerous gleam in Benny's eyes.

"Take it off 'er—" Benny's voice grated —"or by God, I will!"

This was so unlike the gentle Benny whom she had dominated for four years. Flo was amazed, yet her rage flamed higher.

"Are you going to make a scene? Haven't you any decency!"

"*Decency?*" Benny choked over the word.

"Do you want our guests to hear you?"

"What does it matter—now?" He was trembling. "Take off that bracelet."

"Very well," she replied scornfully. "If you're such a fool——" And unclasping the bracelet she handed it to Winston. "I apologize, Alec—for *him*."

"Ya don't hafta apologize for me." Benny swung round to Winston. "Now, get out."

"Look here——" Winston began insolently.

"*Get out!*"

"How dare you," cried Flo, "speak that way to my friends!"

Benny disregarded her. He took a step toward Winston. "You get t' hell outa here!"

And Winston, with admirable nonchalance, smiled at Flo. "There's no use having a brawl," he said. "I'll be rolling. Goodnight." And he walked out of the room, lighting a cigarette.

Suddenly Benny's anger left him. He

turned to Flo, his lips trembling. "Listen ——"

But Flo, her head high, moved quickly past him and out into the hall. Winston had gone.

At the door stood Frederick, in an attitude that proclaimed the dignity of labor. (Beecham, in his cups, having retired for the night—if not for the week-end.) Rita Eliot and Henry Henry were getting their coats. If they were aware of the scene that had just taken place, their manner did not betray it. When Benny came out they were saying good-night to Flo and Lady Margaret —quite as if nothing had happened. Back in the living room, LeGrand and Hummel and Lew remained, and Peggy was playing the piano.

"Awfully jolly," Henry Henry said, pumping Benny's hand.

"Yeh?" Benny's smile was pathetic.

And Rita Eliot said to him, in a low voice that only he could hear: "Do come over to see me. I don't live very far—you can find me in the telephone book."

"Thanks," muttered Benny.

Then they were gone. Lady Margaret said good-night briskly and went up to bed.

Flo turned to him, her eyes cold as jewels. "This is the end," she said. "I've stood all I'm going to."

"Listen," he pleaded. "I'm sorry I——"

"There's nothing to say." She shrugged. "It's finished. You and I are through."

"My God, Flo——"

In the other room B. B. Hummel laughed raucously. Peggy Page was playing that crazy tune, "Bum-Bum-Boodle-Oo." Flo shuddered.

"I'm leaving—to-night," she said.

"You can't do that," he muttered brokenly.

"Can't I? You'll see."

"Listen—I'm sorry I acted like I did. I couldn't help it. It made me crazy, seein' him——"

"You behaved like a—a peasant!" She hurled the word at him spitefully. "That's all you are—that's all you'll ever be—a *peasant!*"

Benny stared at her incredulously, with the expression of a faithful dog whose master has suddenly, for no reason at all, lashed him cruelly with a whip.

Then Gus LeGrand strolled into the hall. "Well," he called, "we was wondering what had became of you."

Benny could not answer. He wheeled abruptly, walked past LeGrand, and through to the living room. Peggy was thumping the piano with artistic frenzy, and Hummel, his back turned, was pouring himself a drink. Benny crossed the room and went out on the terrace, breathing deeply of the chill night air.

"You look like you'd been socked for a count of fourteen!" Lew's voice behind him.

Benny could not speak for a moment.

Then: "It's all over, Lew," he muttered. "She—she's quittin' me."

"Again?" said Lew. "She oughta get a new act."

"No—it's the truth. She's leavin'—tonight." Benny slumped into a chair and

dropped his head in his hands. "We had a row," he confessed bitterly. "She—she called me a—peasant."

"Yeh?" remarked Lew. "A peasant, eh? Well, I didn't suppose *she* was no king's daughter. Where'd she come from?"

"Iowa," Benny sighed. "Her father runs a little grocery store out there. That's where I first met 'er—in a town called Waterloo."

"You an' Napoleon," said Lew.

*

In the hall Gus LeGrand looked sharply at Flo. "Is something wrong?" And as she did not reply he continued: "Anything *I* can do? You know I'm your friend."

"Oh, I know you are." Flo gave him a troubled smile. "I don't mind telling you—something *is* wrong—everything. I'm going up to town to-night."

"Come with me," he suggested, "on the yacht. I mean—" he added hastily—"with Hummel an' me."

"Oh, thank you, but I couldn't. I—I'm taking our car—*my* car."

"Is—ah . . ." LeGrand gestured with his cigar toward the other room.

"I'm leaving him," she said breathlessly. "I can't stand it any longer!"

LeGrand's eyes lighted. "I want to talk business to you."

"No—please—I don't feel like talking business to-night. I must tell my maid to start packing."

"You'll be interested by what I got to say to you." LeGrand pushed open the library door. "Come in here."

Flo had always recognized his authority. Without a word she turned and walked into the library. LeGrand followed her and carefully closed the door behind him.

"Now, then," he began. "Sit down. I have been waiting for this moment—over a year."

She seated herself opposite him, puzzled.

"I knew all along," he said, "that you and him wouldn't stick together. And you are making the wisest move of your life, quitting him. From the start I have been interested in *you*—not him. Here is my

proposition." He hitched his chair closer. "Six weeks from to-night I open a magnificent new club. It will be named for you—and you will be the star attraction."

Flo's eyes widened.

"To-morrow I hire a new partner for you. I got my eye on one already—a South American, so handsome he makes this Benny look like a waiter." LeGrand gestured forcefully, with a sparkle of diamond rings. "I will stop at nothing—all the advertising—everything money can buy to make you—*you alone*—the biggest dancing star in America!" He paused for dramatic effect. "Well—what do you say?"

Every word he had uttered had been a caress to Flo's vanity. The picture of a magnificent new night club, named for her, with herself as the star attraction, glowed brightly in her imagination. And now, in her angry resentment of Benny—it was a perfect moment for the big gesture. Her heart beating very fast, she smiled. "I'll do it!"

"Good." LeGrand's eyes smouldered with

pleasure. He leaned across and took one of her hands in both of his. "You will see what it means to have me for your friend."

"Thank you *so* much!" She arose and, crossing the room, rang the bell.

"To-morrow, have lunch with me," LeGrand said, "and we go over all the plans. Everything shall be like you want it."

Frederick, the footman, knocked and entered.

"Tell Céleste to pack my things at once, please," Flo commanded. "And have Horton bring the car around."

"Horton's gone to bed, madam."

"Then wake him up. I'm driving to New York to-night. I'll be ready to leave in fifteen minutes."

The footman's eyebrows lifted. "Will you be back, madam, for luncheon?"

"I'm not coming back," she said.

Chapter 11

ON A quiet golden September afternoon, ten days later, Benny Darrell walked slowly up the gravel path from the kennels. Only a few weeks ago Flo had had them built, at great expense; and now they were empty. A green motor van had just driven away—with all the Russian wolfhounds. Benny had sold them and had been forced to take a

thousand dollars less than Flo had paid for them. The check was in his pocket now. That would go to Flo.

After that Saturday night when the world had collapsed about his ears he had gone up to New York and tried in vain to see her. Nobody appeared to know where she was. Gus LeGrand, he suspected, knew—but would not tell. LeGrand seemed almost hostile. At length B. B. Hummel got into communication with Flo and telephoned to Benny that he was acting as her representative. Anything that Benny had to say to her could be said through him, etc. Hummel seemed friendly, though there was little subtlety in his method. Subtlety, however, is not a virtue common among booking agents.

And swallowing his pride, Benny had made, through Hummel, pathetic overtures to her. They had all been rejected. He had made a final plea, hinting at the financial ruin that stared them in the face if the dance team were dissolved. There had been no reply to that. Benny realized now that

her flight had been no mere temperamental outburst impelled by pique. She meant what she said: she was never coming back. Dejectedly he returned to the lonely house at Easthampton.

Then had followed days of worry and depression. There were times when Benny could not make himself believe that the preceding gay summer had ever really happened. Everything about the place reminded him of Flo. He could not get her out of his thoughts.

His first act, upon learning that there was no hope of a reconciliation, had been to let the servants go—all but the cook and the gardener. He could no longer afford to retain them. Flo had taken her maid, the chauffeur, and the car to New York. The cook was a stalwart, grim woman, whom Flo had been in the habit of addressing as "Cook," though Benny had always spoken to her respectfully as Mrs. Corey. After the departure of the other servants his respect for her increased. Mrs. Corey developed unsuspected kindliness. She not

only prepared and served delicious meals for him, but she took complete charge of the great empty house and looked after him with the solicitude of an elderly aunt. She felt very sorry for Benny.

"It's always a poor lamb like him," she told Alphonse, the gardener, "that gets taken in by such trollops as her! He's grievin' his heart out. I could wring her neck!"

In the ten days that had passed there had been many callers—Flo's new-found acquaintances, who had, during the summer, found them "amusing," and who had enjoyed bathing in their pool and drinking their abundant liquor. Fair-weather friends. Benny had always felt that they used this place as if it were a road house. Now when they called he sent word by Mrs. Corey that there was no one at home. And the fair-weather friends drove off gaily to some other hospitable house where free drinks were to be had. His cellar, Benny had discovered, was dry: a calamity for which the thirst of Beecham the butler had been largely responsible. And now there were yellow

maple leaves, the first fallen leaves of autumn, floating in the neglected swimming pool.

Salomy, the bull pup, was his constant companion during these unhappy days. This afternoon, after the wolfhounds had been sold and taken away, Salomy celebrated her relief from jealousy, frisking in frantic circles. She was doing her best to please her master, but something was wrong with him: he did not play as in the old days.

As he rounded the house Benny heard the soft whir-r of the motor lawn mower, and the sweet scent of new-cut grass reached him. Down by the hedge Alphonse, the Belgian gardener, was plodding along behind the lawn mower. Benny paused. He would have to tell Alphonse that he could no longer afford to keep him. And it would not be easy. Alphonse was old, and he had a wife and four children. With winter coming on, he would have a hard time finding another job as a gardener. Benny felt sad about it, but there was no other way.

As he started across the lawn a blue

roadster swung up the drive. There were two ladies in it, and the one at the wheel, in yellow sports clothes, waved to him. Rita Eliot! He knew her car. She had come over a few days ago with a friendly invitation to take him to play golf. But Benny had never learned the game, and so they had sat in the sun and talked about everything but themselves. Benny liked her immensely. She was, he knew, a great lady, but there was nothing in her manner that suggested any superiority. Perhaps that was because she *was* a great lady, Benny thought. She was gentle and sympathetic and had a fine sense of humor. She treated him as an equal, a companion; whereas so many of the "society" people this summer had acted as if he were some sort of a freak on exhibition. Rita Eliot laughed *with* him, not *at* him. He had been lonelier after she left that day.

This afternoon Lady Margaret Thrace was with her. They drew up with gay greetings and alighted.

"Don't be alarmed," Rita Eliot told him, "we haven't descended on you for dinner."

"Gee," he said, "I'm sure gladda see ya!"

And they knew that he meant it. Loneliness had left its mark on him, and there were shadows under his eyes. Rita Eliot thought they were fine eyes. She was more interested in him, perhaps, than she cared to have him know.

"Matter of fact," began Lady Margaret briskly, "I've come on business. You told me the other day you wanted to sell this place. I've been looking for a client—and I believe I have one."

"Yeh?" said Benny. "That's mighty nice of ya."

And as they walked across the garden they discussed real-estate values. Lady Margaret surmised, without having been told, that the place was still heavily mortgaged. Moreover, as autumn was the worst possible season for disposing of a country house, it would have to be sold at a loss. She was very businesslike about it.

They sat in the shade of a great orange parasol in the garden, and Mrs. Corey

brought them tea and cakes. Benny still looked upon tea with suspicion and contented himself with smoking innumerable cigarettes. Flo's name was not mentioned.

When they were leaving Rita Eliot said: "I want you to come for dinner on Thursday." And at his look of embarrassment, she added: "Oh, nothing formal—just you and Maggie and my father and I."

"Do come, my dear," urged Lady Margaret.

"Thanks," he said, "that's awful kind of ya, but——"

"I'll send a car for you," Rita told him. She knew that he no longer had a car.

"Oh, I could get over on the train."

"Trains," said Lady Margaret, "are poisonous. I never travel except by motor or airplane."

"Oh, I ain't proud." Benny smiled. "Seems like half my life's been spent ridin' the rattlers—trains, elevateds, street cars. Why, once I lived in Brooklyn, an' I was workin' in New York, an' every night for two years I had to gopher home."

"Gopher?" repeated Lady Margaret, puzzled.

"Yeh—in the subway."

"Gopher—the subway!" Lady Margaret laughed. "Oh, I say, how divine!"

And as they drove away Rita Eliot said: "That's one of the sweetest men I've ever known."

"How right you are," assented Lady Margaret. "They'd adore him in England—he's so completely himself."

"He has charm," Rita mused. "I don't mean that blah quality that people so often mistake for charm. It's curious—breeding ought to give us unfailing instincts, but it doesn't. He came from nowhere, yet he has an innate sense of the decent thing. Have you noticed how he refuses to discuss his trouble? That's rather nice, you know."

"Benny's a complete darling," declared Lady Margaret. "I swear, if I weren't an old woman I believe I'd marry him myself!" She chuckled. "What a sensation that would cause in your newspapers. I can see the headlines now: *Duke's Daughter Marries Dancer!*"

And Rita Eliot, with her blue eyes on the road ahead, answered: "Stranger things have happened."

A few days later the place was sold. And though Benny was reluctant to part from Mrs. Corey he felt a vast relief in getting away. Memories of Flo haunted the house until he could endure it no longer.

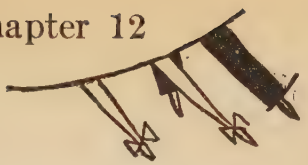
The place, to be sure, had been sold at a considerable loss. After all the debts were paid there remained but a few hundred dollars. And during the height of their fame they had earned more than a hundred and sixty thousand! Where had it all disappeared? Benny asked himself, bewildered. Yet it was the old story.

Of the few hundred dollars he sent most of it to Flo, by way of Hummel. She would need it. Then with Salomy he journeyed up to New York and took an inside single room in the theatrical hotel where he and Flo had stayed at the time of their first Broadway failure—and which they had quitted immediately upon their first success.

The same clerk was behind the desk, and

the same red-haired telephone operator, and Leo, the intimate bellboy. They were all very glad to see him. It was, in a way, like coming home; but when he ascended to the small single room, despite Salomy's companionship, the old loneliness engulfed him once more.

Chapter 12



STANDING in front of the cheval glass, Flo put on the close-fitting little black hat which her maid handed her. For a moment she stood admiring her reflection, turning her head this way and that, as if seeking the perfect profile for her new photographs. She was wearing a trim black suit. Flo always liked herself in black—and besides, she

had a romantic idea that it fitted her mood this afternoon. In the past few days she had been thinking rather too much about Benny.

The reception room of her suite at the Hotel Versailles was "done" in apple-green and orchid tones, with furniture that Benny used to call Looie Quince. It was an expensive suite. Flo was just the least bit worried, too, about money matters. But she was on her way now to see LeGrand: he would fix everything.

"Céleste," she said, "if Mr. Winston calls, tell him he can get me at LeGrand's office."

"Yes, ma'am." The maid no longer dared reply "*Oui, madame,*" for fear Flo would attempt to say something in the French language. Flo's struggles with the French language were somewhat trying.

She was feeling vaguely sad this afternoon as she went down to her car. Yet she enjoyed the homage of the hotel servants. Well, it was something to be Fleurette Sloane. Wherever she went she beheld

pictures of herself and announcements of the opening of her new Club Fleurette. (Her new club!) LeGrand had kept his promise. He was spending a fortune in advertising.

The new partner he had secured for her, one Ramon Cuervo, a Mexican youth who insisted on being Argentine, was handsome in a dark, flashy way—and a graceful dancer. He was outrageously vain, however, and not particularly bright. There were moments when Flo, rehearsing with him, missed Benny's invention and guidance. But there was no use thinking about Benny. And to be truthful, she had been too busy to think much about him. Like most ladies of the theater, she was more interested in herself than in anyone else. They had been separated for more than a month now, and in less than two weeks the new Club Fleurette would open in a burst of splendor and publicity. After that, her name would never again be linked with Benny's: she would be a star in her own right. Yet that was not all that she wanted. A hundred times a day she

found herself imagining how pleasant life as Mrs. Alexander Winston would be. . . .

The magenta limousine was waiting in front of the hotel. She had never quite got over the little thrill of seeing her own chauffeur touch his cap to her as he held open the door of her own car. On the way down to LeGrand's office she thought a great deal about Winston.

Since her quarrel with Benny at Easthampton she had been seeing Winston daily in town: going about with him to luncheon, dinner, and the theater. She now wore his diamond-and-sapphire bracelet without fear of criticism. After all, what harm was there in that? It pleased her to think that she had "managed" him so adroitly—keeping him always at a certain distance. His kisses she never failed to censor. She was a little afraid of his ardor. And she made him say goodnight at the door.

Flo knew that he wanted to marry her, and she cherished the Victorian superstition that a man must "respect" the woman he intends to marry. Yet only last evening

Winston had been annoyed by her virtuous caution.

"I've never known anyone so damned prudish!" he had told her angrily.

And Flo, lifting her cool lips to his, had kissed him gently. "Not *yet!*" she had whispered, with her sweetest smile.

Yes, she had managed this dangerous bachelor skillfully. . . .

LeGrand was awaiting her in his elaborate Broadway office. He rose as she was ushered in, and came forward, taking her hand warmly in both of his.

"You are looking more wonderful than I ever seen you!"

"Oh, you always say such nice things." Flo enjoyed flattery, no matter how obvious it might be.

He waved her to a chair beside his desk, but instead of seating himself he stood looking down at her with a florid seriousness.

"I sent for you," he began, "because before the club opens on October twelfth, Columbus's Birthday—there's something we got to decide. It's about—*him*."

"You mean my husband?"

"Exactly." He cleared his throat. "The public ain't interested in a star with a husband."

"But what can I do about it?"

"Divorce him."

Flo's eyes were troubled. She had known all along that this day would come, but she had tried to avoid thinking of it. "I—I don't know what to say. . . ."

"You and him are through, ain't you?"

"Y-yes, but——"

"It's got to be done sooner or later—you might as well get it over with."

"But a divorce is so—unpleasant. And so difficult."

"Easy. Like *that!*" He snapped his stubby fingers.

"I don't see how. After the club opens I won't be able to take time to go to Paris."

"That ain't necessary."

"Then how else can it——"

"Look here—I'm managing your affairs, ain't I? And I been doing pretty well by you

so far, ain't I? Well, just leave everything to me."

"But—he was always good to me. I wouldn't want to do anything to hurt him, and——"

"You ain't going to get soft now, are you?"

"No," she said. "It's all over between us, but just the same, I feel as if——"

"Now, now"— LeGrand smiled and, reaching down, patted her shoulder—"you just leave everything to me. You don't need to bother your pretty little head about it. My lawyer will arrange the whole thing."

"All right," Flo sighed.

Chapter 13

ON AN October afternoon, the day before the opening of the Club Fleurette, the telephone in Benny's room rang, just as he came in from exercising Salomy. He answered it, and a nasal feminine voice informed him that Mr. Kogel was calling.

"Who?" said Benny.

"Mr. Kogel," the nasal feminine voice

repeated, "of Levinsky, Kogel & O'Rourke."

"What are they?" Benny asked. "Acrobats?"

A pause; then a man's oily voice said: "Irving Kogel, Mr. Darrell. I have a communication for you from Mrs. Darrell. Would it be convenient for you to come over to my office?"

"Why"— Benny's heart began beating very fast—"I guess so. I—where's your office at?"

Mr. Kogel told him.

"I'll be right over." Benny went out without even stopping to take off Salomy's harness and leash.

The law offices of Levinsky, Kogel & O'Rourke were plainly furnished but impressive. A funereal stillness pervaded the place. The girl at the outer desk took his name and whispered into a telephone, then a pale, rubber-heeled young man appeared and conducted him to a private office.

Mr. Kogel rose from a desk and shook hands briskly. Benny did not like Mr. Kogel. He was small and quite bald and wore spec-

tacles with such thick lenses that his blue eyes were magnified like the eyes of a fish.

"Sit down," he said.

Benny sat down, twisting his hat in his hands. There was another glass-panelled door. He wondered if Flo was in the next room. And his heart thumped.

"Now, then"— Mr. Kogel's voice was very oily—"about the divorce——"

Benny's mouth opened. "*Divorce?* What ——"

"Certainly." Mr. Kogel smiled. "I thought you knew all about it."

"I—why, no." Benny was sunk.

"Our firm is representing Mrs. Darrell —Miss Sloane, that is. Naturally, you won't protest it. Miss Sloane is most anxious to get it over with, so if you have no objections —and of course you haven't—we had better proceed at once."

"I—I'd—uh—like t' talk it over with her." Benny's eyes were pathetic.

"That," said the lawyer, still smiling, "would be unpleasant for Miss Sloane, I'm afraid. Just at this time, you know—with

her club opening to-morrow night. No, I think we can arrange it satisfactorily between ourselves. Of course, you understand, in this state there is only one way to obtain a divorce quickly."

Benny nodded. He felt numb all over.

"If you will be in your room at the hotel about midnight, a person will call on you." Kogel's frozen smile had become very irritating. "This person will be paid by us, of course. It's just a formality. You needn't worry. Everything will be taken care of in the most dignified manner possible. . . ." His oily voice droned on.

Benny sat staring at the floor. He was no longer listening.

*

Back in his room at the hotel he flung himself on the bed and lay without moving for a long time. It would have been a relief if he could have wept, but his anguish was beyond tears. Salomy sat beside him, gazing at him compassionately. At length she nudged him with a sympathetic nose, and

Benny put his arm around her and drew her close to him.

The telephone by his bedside rang shrilly. For several minutes he did not move, then, as the ringing continued, he sat up and lifted the receiver.

Mr. B. B. Hummel, the operator said, was on his way up.

Benny walked across to the dresser and, pausing in front of the mirror, combed his hair. It would never do to let Hummel know. . . .

A knock on the door. The dapper little booking agent entered, swinging his bamboo cane. "Ah, there, Benny! How's the boy? You're looking great."

"Yeh?" Benny had not seen him since that disastrous night at Easthampton.

"Well," said Hummel, sitting down without waiting for an invitation, "I've called up a coupla times—ya know what I mean? —but I couldn't get in touch with ya."

"I been pretty busy," Benny lied.

"That's just what I come up t' see ya about—business." Hummel tilted his hat

jauntily over one eye. "I got somethin' that'll interest ya, Benny."

"Yeh?"

"Yes, *sir*. Howja like a few weeks vaud-a-ville?"

"I don't think I——"

"Now, listen, Benny! Let's not kid ourselfs—ya know what I mean? You ain't had a dollar comin' into the old till since las' June, an' your expenses been pretty heavy. You ain't had an offer this fall—not since—not since you an' Flo busted up," he finished tactlessly. "I was hopin' Bergen would wantcha for his new show, but he's still in Europe, an' there's nothing settled yet. Ya need the money, so why not take a few weeks in vaud-a-ville, an' then we'll see what turns up. Well, whatta ya say—huh?"

"Nothin' doin'." Benny was staring out the window.

"Say, listen! You ain't gonna let Flo——"

"Leave her name outa this," said Benny almost fiercely.

"Well"—Hummel twisted his mustache

—"I'm only thinkin' what's best for *you*. *She's* goin' ahead on her own, an' she'll be makin' plenty. You can't just sit around an' do nothin'—not with *your* reputation. Why, say—I can getcha a dancin' partner in ten minutes—an' the Office'll give ya fifteen hundred a week—like *that!*" He snapped his fingers.

"I don't feel like workin'," Benny said quietly.

"Don't talk crazy."

"Listen, B. B."— Benny turned—"you're only wastin' your time."

"All right." Hummel rose, shrugging his narrow shoulders. "But think it over, anyhow."

A light tap on the door, and Lew Lewis's doleful countenance peered in.

"If *you're* here," he said to Hummel, "I guess it's all right for anybody t' come in."

"Whatta ya think of this guy, Lew?" Hummel remarked. "I told him I can get him plenty of bookin'—with a new partner—ya know what I mean?—an' he won't listen. I'm only tryin' t' do him a good turn."

"In other words," said Lew, "ya wanta begin collectin' five per cent. again!"

"Well"— Hummel grinned—"an agent's gotta live."

"Why?" asked Lew.

There being no answer to that, Hummel took his departure, after reminding Benny once more to think over the offer.

Benny sat down and, leaning back, closed his eyes wearily.

Lew looked at him, then, addressing Salomy, said: "Don't he look natural? An' ain't the flowers pretty?"

Benny smiled feebly. "Y'ain't so wrong at that, Lew. That's about the way I feel."

"You been ridin' around in a hearse for six weeks. When ya gonna snap out of it?"

"One of these days, I guess." Benny stood up with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Only don't sing me none of your 'See the Silver Lining' numbers."

"Why *dontcha* get a new partner an' take a few weeks in vaud-a-ville?"

"Gee!" Benny smiled miserably. "I couldn't work with nobody but—her. I

ain't got the heart t' even try." He walked over to the window. "It's a funny world."

"Yeh," said Lew, "I heard that one."

"No kidding. I ain't got a chance—that's what I ain't."

"Sure y' ain't."

Benny turned. "Whatta ya mean, sure I ain't?"

"That's what you said."

"Well——"

"Well—what?"

"If I could only get a break," Benny exclaimed. "Just *one break*—ya know—I'd be——"

"It wouldn't do ya no good," replied the cynic of Tin Pan Alley. "A sap's a sap—with any kind of a break."

"That's a wisecrack, ain't it?"

"Take it or leave it," sighed his friend. "It ain't payin' me no interest."

"What's a matter with *me?*" Benny demanded.

"Ha!"

"I'm askin' ya."

"An' I'm tellin' ya. Keep away from the

women. Ya'll be *that* much ahead, anyhow. The rest can't be helped."

"Whatta ya mean, keep away from the women? Why don't *you* keep away from 'em?"

"It's different with me."

"Why?"

"I don't give 'em nothin'," said Lew.

"A lot *I* give 'em!"

"You ain't got a lot—but what ya got, they get."

"How d'ya mean?"

"*You* guess—it's a cross-word."

"Listen," protested Benny, "is it my fault I married a girl that——"

"It's your fault you married anybody!" Lew told him. "You could of been a burglar if you wanted long odds."

"Just a pal, *you* are."

"The Chinese got the right idea," said Lew. "When a baby's born, if it ain't a boy they drop it down a well!"

And for the first time in weeks Benny laughed.

"There's too many dames in the world for

a guy t' waste any time mournin' over *one*," his friend continued. "All ya gotta do is put your head out that window an' whistle."

"Not me, Lew. I guess I'm a one-woman man."

"There ain't such a thing. Adam was the last. An' it wasn't his fault, at that—he just got a bad break on account of the census figgers. Now look at *me*——"

"I can't," said Benny, "without laughin'."

"Look at *me*," Lew persisted. "Ya don't see any women disturbin' *my* rest! I give 'em nothin'. I treat 'em mean."

The telephone rang. Benny answered. It was Peggy Page. "For you," Benny told him.

Lew took the telephone. "Hello? . . . All right, dear," he said meekly, "I'll be right down."

"Yeh!" jeered Benny. "You treat 'em mean, you do!"

"Well"— Lew looked somewhat abashed —"I'll see ya later." And he hurried out.

After Lew had gone, Benny's depression

closed around him again. So, even old Lew, hard-boiled, skeptical, impervious Lew, had fallen! Somehow this revelation of Lew caught in the toils of romance was a blow to Benny's faith in human nature.

He sat there alone, with Salomy dozing asthmatically at his feet, and in the court outside his window twilight deepened. Well, it was all over now. His last hope had gone up in smoke. Flo was divorcing him. And he was to give the evidence. One of those frame-ups. . . . He was glad that he had not told Lew. Lew would have handed him hell for being such a fool. Well, he had never been able to refuse Flo anything—and this was the last thing he could do for her. . . .

"Women!" he reflected bitterly.

Someone knocked on the door. Benny jumped up nervously. It was now quite dark in the room. He switched on the light.

Leo, the intimate bellboy, came in with the newspapers.

"Well, h'are ya t'night, Mr. Darrell?" he inquired conversationally.

Benny assured him that his health was excellent. Leo was pleased, he said, to hear it.

"Leo," said Benny, "are you married?"

"Married?" repeated Leo. "Not me. How could an ice-water salesman support a family?"

After Leo had made his breezy exit Benny stood wondering how many men in the world were happy. It was a large thought. . . .

The telephone rang again. Benny picked it up and heard Rita Eliot's pleasant voice. It had a strangely soothing effect on him.

"Where have you been keeping yourself?" she asked.

Hastily he invented a number of alibis.

"Not at all convincing," she replied. "I have a dark suspicion that you've been neglecting us."

"Who—me? I should say not. Only, well, I been pretty busy, that's all."

"What," she asked, "are you doing this evening after the theater? And before you think up some perfectly preposterous excuse, let me tell you that Maggie and I have

just this minute decided to throw a party and you *can't* refuse!"

"Oh, gee!" He recalled with a guilty start what he would be doing. "Say, I can't make it. I—I'm awful sorry——"

"I'm disappointed in you," Rita said. "Really, I had thought we were going to be friends."

"Listen," he said, "I wish I could—on the level I do. But I got a—well, a business engagement, an' I . . . " His voice trailed off. He knew that it had not sounded convincing.

"I'm afraid you don't like us," she sighed. "I know Maggie will miss you."

"You been mighty kind t' me," he told her huskily. "You an' Lady Margaret both."

"Don't forget us entirely," she said. "I'm going South in a few weeks."

After he had put down the telephone he wondered what Rita Eliot would think when she read the sordid story about him in the morning papers. She would believe the worst. Well, why not? How would anybody know it was a frame-up?

Chapter 14

THE party that Rita Eliot and Lady Margaret "threw" that evening was at the smart Legation Club, and it was a good party. By which is inferred that there were present few of the wrong people and none of the wrong champagne.

Upon the stroke of midnight—though of course no one but the waiters realized the

hour—Rita Eliot was dancing with Alec Winston. She was very lovely in black velvet, and against one shoulder a small cluster of gardenias gave off a sweet, sad fragrance.

"There should be a law," Winston said smilingly in her ear, "against the wearing of gardenias. The scent of them always brings out my romantic nature."

"Once upon a time," she replied lightly, "I might have encouraged you to enlarge upon that theme, but I regret to say that your romantic nature is one of the least interesting things I can think of."

"I have my moments," he laughed.

"And how is the most recent one?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"The moment that has lasted months. Really, Alec, your persistence with the pretty dancer is a glaring admission of your failure. You've been rather publicly devoted to her so long! With other ladies, in that time you have attached the scalp to your belt and waved a graceful if not fond

adieu. I surmise that the fair Flo has been a bit difficult."

"Nonsense," said he, annoyed.

"Perhaps she doesn't yet suspect that your intentions are not entirely honorable."

"I haven't had an honorable intention," he laughed, "since I was a small boy. But speaking of our friends, the Darrells, I hear they're getting a divorce."

"Really?" She looked up at him suddenly as they danced. "Doesn't that rather frighten you, Alec?"

"How so?"

"If she's free—well"— there was a charming mockery in her eyes—"I'm afraid she's one of those sweet old-fashioned girls who'll demand a wedding ring."

"Don't be absurd."

"But I'm wondering," said Rita, "how she'll be able to get a divorce. If she's dancing in New York she can't go to Paris or Reno."

"Benny has nobly agreed to make the supreme sacrifice. He's going to give her a divorce right here in little old New York."

"You mean the——"

"The traditional and time-honored performance, with detectives and everything."

"What a shame!" cried Rita indignantly. "She has no right to demand such a thing from him."

"Apparently she didn't know about it until to-night. When she heard the gory details she raised a fuss, but the lawyers told her it was too late: they'd made all the arrangements."

"It's an outrage!" Rita said. "She shouldn't allow him to go through the disgrace of it—and the rotten notoriety in the papers."

"If you ask me," Winston observed,"I have a suspicion that that admirable character LeGrand is back of it. The 'evidence' is to be gathered to-night, and——"

"To-night?"

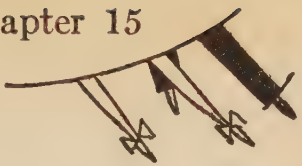
"Yes. So the story's bound to be in to-morrow morning's papers. And the Club Fleurette opens to-morrow night. Does it occur to you that possibly LeGrand had thought of such a coincidence?"

"Of course!" Rita exclaimed. "The swine! And do you mean to tell me *she* is allowing Benny to go through this wretched affair —to sacrifice himself——"

"I tell you," protested Winston, "she has nothing to do with it. LeGrand's lawyers arranged the whole thing."

"He'll be crucified in the newspapers. . . ." Rita seemed to be talking to herself. "That little cat's not worth it! Think what he's suffering to-night—and we're here, playing at being very gay. . . ."

Chapter 15



MIDNIGHT. Benny paced restlessly back and forth across his narrow hotel room. He had something of the feeling of a man in the death house at Sing Sing, waiting to hear the footsteps of the guards.

A few minutes, now, and *she* would arrive—this girl whom he had never seen. He did not even know her name. He would

know her name in the morning, though, when he read it, alongside his own, in the newspaper accounts of the detectives' raid on his room. Just a formality, that hyena lawyer had said. Notoriety that would put a red tag on his name for the rest of his life —and they called it just a formality!

He halted, with a sudden bitter resolve not to go through with it. After the decent life he had led it was damned unfair to let himself in for a filthy business like this—all because Flo wanted a quick divorce! He wondered again what Rita Eliot would think of him when she read to-morrow morning's papers. And the fellows at the Club. Perhaps they would demand his resignation from the Club! He put a hand to his brow. It was damp with cold sweat. Why had he told Kogel that he'd go through with it? Yet—he had. He had given his word. It was too late now to withdraw. . . .

A knock at the door. Salomy looked up sleepily from her blanket at the foot of the bed. Benny tied the sash of his green silk

dressing gown tighter, then walked over and opened the door.

A dark-eyed little girl stood there. Her clothes were cheap but patterned after the mode, and her hat and shoulders were wet with rain. She had a hard, defiant little face, with too much make-up on it.

"Mr. Kogel sent me," she said.

"Oh, yeh." Benny stepped aside, and she came in. He shut the door and leaned against it, embarrassed.

The girl paused in the center of the room, pulled off her hat, shook the raindrops from it, and tossed it on the dresser. Then, nonchalantly, she took off the coat of her blue suit, and hung it across a chair by the radiator. She was wearing a flimsy, sleeveless pink silk waist, the very brevity of which caused Benny further uneasiness.

"Hello, pup," she said to Salomy, and coolly seated herself in the one comfortable chair.

Benny had not moved. He seemed uncertain as to the proper procedure. He stared down at her shoes. They were old and run

over at the heels. She was poor. He felt vaguely sorry for her.

"Sit down," she said, "an' take the load off your fallen arches. I ain't gonna eatcha."

Benny sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed.

"Well—here we are," she remarked. "Got a drink?"

"No," he answered. "I'm sorry—I—I—I don't keep anything here."

He thought he noticed a sort of contempt on her hard little face.

"I don't suppose you got a cigarette, neither!"

He reached over and handed her a package of cigarettes and struck a match for her.

"Thanks." She inhaled deeply and blew forth a cloud of smoke.

And, after a moment, feeling that as the host he should attempt some conversation, he said diffidently: "This is the first divorce I ever had."

"I can see that."

"I'm sorry ya—gotta get mixed up in it, yourself."

"Oh, don't worry about me," she told him. "I been through this racket before. The dicks'll be along in a minute an' do their stuff, then I can be on my way. Nothin' to it."

"But to-morrow—the newspapers——"

"What's the difference?" She ran her fingers through her crinkly black bobbed hair. "Who the hell knows *me?*"

He tried not to think of the difference to *him.* "They pay ya well for it?" he asked, merely for something to say.

"Twenty-five bucks. Easy money. It wouldn't be that much—I've done it for five—only they said you was well known. *I* never heard of you. Something on the stage, ain't you?"

"Who—me?" Benny smiled wanly. "No, not much."

"Well"— she leaned back and crossed her knees—"it won't be long now."

A sharp knock on the door. Benny jumped up nervously and turned to her. "What"ll I do?"

"It's the dicks," she told him, smoking

calmly. "This is the big raid scene. Let 'em in."

His knees felt suddenly very weak. Well—get it over! Steeling himself, he walked across and opened the door. Then he gasped aloud. There, with an ermine wrap about her, stood Rita Eliot. And the light in the hall made a halo over her fair hair.

She came in quickly, smiling a little, and pushed the door shut behind her. "I just dropped in," she said casually, "to say hello."

Benny stood speechless. That she—of all persons—should come to his room to-night!

But Rita Eliot seemed not at all surprised to find the girl with him. She smiled at her friendlily. Benny opened his mouth to utter some sort of an introduction. Then, panic-stricken, he realized that he did not even know the girl's name!

But Rita Eliot, completely at ease, said: "How do you do," to her, as if introductions weren't at all essential, and sat down, throwing aside her ermine wrap. To Rita Eliot there was apparently no awkwardness in the

situation. She was a thoroughbred. And coolly she began to tell them about the party she had just left.

The girl stared at her in amazement. Then after a moment suspicion narrowed her eyes and she flung down her cigarette. "Say," she demanded, "what the hell kind of a game *is* this, anyhow?"

"I dare say it does seem odd, my dashing in here this way," Rita told her. "But Benny and I are such old friends——"

"You must be!" sneered the girl. "There's a rule against having a woman in a man's room—even in *this* hotel."

And still smiling Rita said: "I know. It's such a silly rule, isn't it?"

"I'm wise to you." The girl's scarlet mouth was ugly. "You're tryin' to give me a little competition, eh?"

Rita pretended not to understand. She turned toward the door, listening.

Men's voices sounded then, outside in the hall. And instantly Rita began to talk to the girl as if they were old friends. And as Benny stared at them a key rattled in the

lock and the door swung open. The house detective stood there, scowling, and over his shoulder peered two heavy-jowled men, wearing soft hats.

Just at that moment Rita Eliot, with her hand on the girl's bare arm, was saying: "I'm so glad we found Benny in, aren't you, my dear? The others will be along any——" She broke off, glancing at the men in the door with a startled expression. "Oh! And who are these—gentlemen?"

The three detectives blinked. But none of them was more astonished than Benny himself. For a few tingling seconds no one spoke. Then Rita Eliot rose with an impatient gesture.

"I don't understand," she said. And there was a patrician annoyance in her frown as she faced the intruders. "What do you want?"

The house detective was first to find his voice. *He* knew a lady when he saw one! Sheepishly he turned to the other sleuths. "I guess there must be some mistake, boys."

The other sleuths were pop-eyed in confusion.

Then the house detective did a strange thing—for a house detective. He took off his hat. "Excuse us, ma'am," he said, bowing in the general direction of Rita Eliot. "There's been a mistake here. Excuse us, Mr. Darrell, please." And he backed out, bumping into the other sleuths. The door closed.

Within the room a small silence. Then Rita Eliot, calmly, as if nothing had happened, gathered up her ermine wrap.

"My car is downstairs," she said to the girl. "I'll take you wherever you're going."

Sullenly, without a word, the girl began putting on her coat and hat.

Benny looked at Rita Eliot, and there were wonderment and gratitude in his eyes. But he could think of nothing to say. It had all happened so quickly. . . .

At the door Rita took his hand, smiling. "Good-night," she said. "Do come and see me soon."

"Gee . . ." He swallowed hard. "Thanks."

The girl followed her out. She did not even look at him. Then the door closed, and they were gone.

Benny stood staring down at the worn carpet. He had a dazed feeling that he had been saved from something. But he did not understand it at all.

*

In the dim interior of her cabriolet, moving out into the traffic of Broadway, Rita Eliot said: "You haven't told me where to drop you."

And the girl answered dully: "The Hong Kong Chop Suey'll do. I haven't ate yet to-night."

Rita Eliot spoke through the tube to the chauffeur. Then she said: "If this business had gone through, what would they have paid you?"

"Twenty-five."

"I don't want you to lose it."

"Ah, I don't care," the girl sighed. "It's all in a night's work." Then the hard line of her scarlet mouth softened. "I'd of felt

kind of sorry for him, getting in a jam like that. He ain't a bad sort of fella."

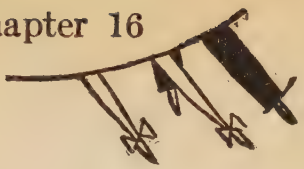
Rita Eliot opened her gold-embroidered handbag and took out a bank note and pressed it in the girl's hands.

The girl looked down at it. The bank note was yellow, and there was a "*C*" in one corner. A hundred dollars!

"God—you're a sport!" She glanced at Rita queerly. "*I* getcha—you didn't wanta see him framed. Maybe you're stuck on him yourself!"

"No," Rita smiled gently. "But I agree with you—he's not a bad sort of fellow."

Chapter 16



THE crowd at the opening of the Club Fleurette resembled any other crowd, at the opening of any other night club. Every table was occupied, and, as the patrons had been assured that there would be no interference by prohibition officers, bottles stood about blatantly on every table. Lights were low, and a famous band played softly

beside the polished square of dance floor. (Later on, as the club became established, Gus LeGrand would replace it with a cheaper band, though there would be no announcement of the change. Gus LeGrand was no fool.)

If he was no fool, neither was he much of an interior decorator. He took great pride in planning the decorations of his night clubs himself, and this one was "done" in tones of baby-blue and orange, a color scheme which required little imagination. Flo had been enthusiastic over it, but tonight, as LeGrand stood in the entrance, looking over the crowd, he realized that the decorations were too cold for a night club. And the discovery did not add to his good humor.

All day he had been in a mood of seething fury. To begin with, the failure of Kogel's detectives—and the consequent collapse of Flo's divorce—had put him in a rage. That sensational publicity in the morning papers would have been worth thousands of dollars. All lost now. Over the telephone he cursed

Kogel vilely, whereupon Kogel replied, not without a certain infuriating dignity, that after this LeGrand could do his own dirty work. Everything, it seemed, had gone wrong during the day, and on top of it all, Flo had quarrelled violently with Cuervo, her new dancing partner. LeGrand had just left them wrangling back-stage. Their dance was to go on in a few minutes.

Something seemed missing to-night. As he watched the crowd he sensed the absence of that spirited gaiety which had made such a tumultuous success of the Club Bon Bon, the night he opened it, to present Darrell and Sloane for the first time. LeGrand scowled. He had spent a fortune furnishing this place and exploiting Flo as a star. . . .

He looked at his watch. Time for their dance. Swinging on his heel, he walked back through a narrow passage, to her dressing room.

*

At an inconspicuous table on the balcony, unnoticed in the crowd, for the lights were dim, sat Benny, with Lew and Peggy Page.

Benny was silent, sipping ginger ale slowly. He had never cared for liquor, though tonight it might have eased the aching loneliness he felt.

Observing his friend's gloomy mien Lew said: "I told ya not t' come here."

"Oh, well"— Benny roused himself—"I want to see how Flo goes. I certainly hope she gets over big."

"It's a lov-aly place." Peggy's eyes were large as she glanced around at the flamboyant decorations.

"All it needs," said Lew, "is a nickel piano."

B. B. Hummel breezed up to their table, wearing an immense white carnation in the lapel of his 'varsity-cut dinner jacket.

"A big evening!" he greeted them effervescently. "A big evening. Am I right?"

Benny said hello, and would have asked Hummel to sit down, but Lew impolitely lifted his leg across the vacant chair. Lew had never been delicate in expressing his prejudices.

"Well," Hummel continued, unabashed

by the song writer's lack of cordiality. "Gus has certainly laid himself out with this new place, ain't he?"

"If he was laid out *in* it," said Lew, "with a large floral wreath from the Elks, I'd like it better."

"Why, you don't understand Gus," protested Hummel genially. "Gus is a wonderful fella."

And Lew replied: "He'd climb a tree if anybody crackled a peanut!"

"By the way, Benny," said Hummel, hastily changing the subject. "I just seen some of your society friends downstairs—this here now Lady what's-her-name, an' Miss Eliot, an' that big nance an' Winston, the polo player. They're parked at a ringside table."

"Yeh?" Benny did not look up. He had been thinking of Rita Eliot all day.

"Well"-— Hummel gave a jaunty twist to his mustache—"the big show comes on in a minute. Am I right? See y'all later." And he passed along to another table.

"You *weren't* very nice to him," Peggy reproved Lew.

Lew sighed. "That ape's feelin's are so hard t' hurt, I give it up. Every time ya insult him ya gotta hand him a blue print t' go with it!"

*

In the elaborate salon off her dressing room Flo, costumed and made up for her opening dance number, confronted LeGrand almost tearfully. At one side stood Ramon Cuervo, a sleek, handsome, patent-leather haired young man in evening clothes of an extreme fashion. He was the new dancing partner.

"I tell you," exclaimed Flo angrily, "I can't work with him, that's all there is to it!"

"Now, now," comforted LeGrand clumsily, "pull yourself together. In two minutes you got to be out on the floor."

"He don't help me—all he's trying to do is put himself over!" she cried. "In our fast one-step he holds me all wrong for the

whirls—I'm afraid I'll fall! It's an outrage, that's what it is!"

"How about this, Cuervo?" demanded LeGrand. "You know what you're here for —to do like Miss Sloane wants you to do. She's the star."

"He acts like *he* was the star!" flashed Flo.

The sleek young man merely shrugged his tailored shoulders. "Nothing I do please 'er. She don' know w'at she want."

"If you look out at the crowd to-night —with that silly grin of yours—instead of watching me on those whirls——"

"Time to go on!" LeGrand clapped his hands suddenly.

Flo turned and dabbed at her nose with a powder puff. Then she swept haughtily past her dancing partner, the tulle panniers of her flame-colored gown like an aura around her.

"The best of luck!" called LeGrand.

Ramon Cuervo straightened his white bow tie, glanced in the mirror, and followed her out.

*

From their table in the darkened balcony Benny leaned forward, gripping his knees, intently watching the couple on the floor below. In a dazzling circle of spotlight they moved with languorous grace through a tango. Benny's technical eye recognized the tango—it was an old step that he had invented, that he and Flo had used last season at the Club Bon Bon. Her new partner, he observed, was at home in a tango. Well, he was a Mexican. But there was nothing particularly *interesting* in their dancing. Benny found himself fluttering a handkerchief across his damp brow. He was very nervous. Flo had received a big hand when she made her entrance—that was natural; but at the finish of the tango the applause was not deafening. Benny stirred nervously. Perhaps the next one would get them. . . .

The next one proved to be a "butterfly waltz"—also of Benny's invention. It did not thrill the opening-night patrons, many of whom were by this time in wine. Here and there bursts of conversation rose above the music. People were not paying attention.

"Listen," whispered Lew audibly. "They're about as exciting as Jap acrobats closing the bill!"

Benny was silent, worried. There was less applause than before. It looked as if Flo would be a flop. While she was changing her gown, Ramon Cuervo came in on one of those absurd skipping solo numbers, such as male dancers invariably perform while their parthers are changing their costumes. Cuervo was a competent hoofer, and handsome enough, but his personality threw off no sparks of magnetism.

When they came on for their final dance, Flo's billowy cloth-of-gold picture dress brought spontaneous applause. She looked so radiantly beautiful that Benny's heart felt a stab of pain. Yet he leaned forward, his eyes brightening. Perhaps she could win them back with this number. The music swung into the quick, stirring "Paris." The spotlight upon them, Flo, in Cuervo's arms, floated out into the intricacies of a fleet one-step that Benny had devised two seasons ago. As they whirled the length of the floor

Cuervo smiled at the crowd. Benny noticed that he seemed more intent on registering his own steps than in guiding Flo. Benny felt uneasy. Those whirls were dangerous. . . .

They spun round and round to the swelling crescendo of the music, then of a sudden Flo slipped and fell. Benny lurched to his feet. An exclamation from the crowd. She was up again in an instant, and clinging to Cuervo's hand as they took their bows. But the whole performance had been ruined. And as she left the floor Benny noticed that she limped. He sat down again slowly.

"Too bad," Peggy Page said.

"It was his fault," muttered Benny. "The damned spick!"

Around them people had resumed drinking, eating, and laughing as if nothing had happened.

"Those looked to me like all your old steps." Peggy rattled the ice in her empty glass: a well-rehearsed cue for Lew to bring forth his flask.

"No," lied Benny loyally. "That was all her own stuff."

"Well," declared Lew, "they better change their act or the customers'll keep away from this joint like there was a scarlet-fever sign on the front door."

Benny sat silent for a while. Perhaps he had never loved Flo so much as in this hour of her failure. And the disturbing thought came to him that he could be of service to her. She needed him. Even if it was all over between them, he might be able to give her a few suggestions, help her with some new steps.

Lew picked up a large menu card. "How about some groceries?"

Benny rose with a sudden decision. "I'm on my way," he said. "See ya both tomorrow. G'night." And he left them and made his way out through the crowded tables.

"There goes a guy," sighed Lew, "that made the big mistake of bein' in love with his own wife."

Chapter 17

ONE o'clock. Flo was sitting before the lighted mirrors of her dressing table, removing the last traces of her make-up. The doctor had just departed, after bandaging her ankle. It was, he explained, a strained ligament: nothing particularly serious, but she must be careful of it for a few days. Flo was still furious over the accident—and had so

expressed herself, in no uncertain terms, to Ramon Cuervo. It had hurt her pride more than her ankle, yet she resented the bandage, which, thin as it was, showed through her sheer stocking. Annoying that it should have happened to-night, for she was to meet Alec Winston as soon as he could decently get away from his party.

The neat colored maid, hired by LeGrand to attend her in her dressing room, stood by, holding the black lace evening frock she was to wear. All about the dressing room were baskets of flowers. Florally, to-night's opening had eclipsed that enchanted evening when she and Benny had made their first hit at the Club Bon Bon. But only florally. Outside of B. B. Hummel and one or two professionals and hangers-on, nobody had come back to tell her how wonderful her dancing had been. None of the "real" people, as she called them. Flo thought it strange, but it did not bother her particularly. It did not occur to her for an instant that her performance had been a disappointment. Flo was blessed with a sublime faith

in herself. Still, she wondered why Lady Margaret and Rita Eliot had not come back. They were out there. Now that she stopped to think about it, she had seen Lady Margaret only once since leaving Easthampton. Doubtless Lady Margaret—and all of them—had been too disgusted by Benny's vulgarity. She sighed. Poor Benny. . . .

Someone knocked on the door.

"Just a moment," Flo called. "I'm not dressed."

"It's Mr. LeGrand," whispered the maid.

Flo stood up, flung off her pale green kimono, and stepped into the evening dress. "Come in," she said.

LeGrand came in. His florid face was unusually serious.

"Well?" Flo smiled at him.

"I'd like to talk to you alone," he told her bluntly.

"Of course." She turned to the maid. "I won't need you any more, Anna. Good-night."

The maid said, "Good-night," and went out, closing the door softly.

Flo sat down. LeGrand lighted a fresh cigar and took a few steps across the room. A queer mood for him to be in, Flo thought —on the night of a successful opening. She waited. He continued to smoke in a brooding silence. After a moment Flo said:

"I thought everything went off splendidly, didn't you?"

"I don't know."

"Really?" She felt suddenly uneasy.

"We got a lot of things to talk over." He looked at her, and there was a smoldering light in his eyes. "Come to supper at my apartment. I have ordered everything."

"Oh, I—I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"Well, I've another engagement."

"Break it." He had never spoken this way to her before.

"I couldn't do that." The expression in his eyes disconcerted her.

"It's time we had an understanding, you and me." He frowned heavily. "Who's your—engagement with?"

"Why"— she was annoyed at his impertinence—"with Mr. Winston."

"That fella, eh? Well, I guess you can put him off."

"But I tell you I can't."

He came toward her, and his thick lips curled unpleasantly. "You know what this place cost me? You know what it cost me to give you this opening to-night?"

"It's nice of you to bring *that* up." She was angry now.

"Yes—well, I'm telling you. It's my money. Who do you think put you over in New York? *I* did. I've done everything anybody could do for a woman—and I guess it's about time we talked things over. Get your wrap and come with me. My car's waiting."

"Please don't be disagreeable," she said. "I've told you——"

"Who do you think you are?" He hurled the words at her in a sudden outburst of temper. "After all I spent on you—an' you're a flop! That's what you are—a flop!"

"Oh!" Flo's lips opened incredulously. "What do you *mean?*"

"That's what I mean! You didn't get over to-night—everybody out there knows it. I thought you could make the grade as a star by yourself—but you failed. If you don't think so—read to-morrow's papers!"

Flo sat staring at him as if he had struck her. It couldn't be true, what he was saying.

"And even now," he said harshly, "you ain't ready to listen to reason. Well, I tell you—you're coming with me to-night—or you don't dance in this place again."

"Oh, so *that's* it." She stood up swiftly, her eyes narrowed with fury. "That's the *understanding* you're talking about!"

"Everything I've done for you!" His cigar had gone cold. He flung it upon the new carpet and shook a finger at her. "And what do I get from you? Nothing! You wouldn't even go through with the divorce after I go to all that trouble. The poor sap was willing—*he* would give you a divorce, but you——"

"You didn't tell me what he'd have to go through!" she flashed back at him. "I didn't know. You said your lawyer would

handle everything. When I found out it meant dragging Benny through a dirty scandal, I *wouldn't* do it. No! He's never done anything to deserve it."

"Listen to me." He was so close to her now that she could feel his hot breath on her face. And his eyes blazed like a madman's. "I've waited a year and a half for this night—and you ain't going to cheat me. Do you hear?—you ain't going to cheat me!"

She stepped back. He followed her.

"You're coming with me—or by to-morrow the sign with your name in electric lights will be down from in front of this club. I'll tear it down, myself, and smash every bulb spelling your name! And that will be the last time your name goes up on Broadway. I'll ruin you!"

"You couldn't," she taunted scornfully.

Neither of them heard the door open behind them.

LeGrand's face was purple with frenzy. He seized her shoulders roughly. "By God, you're coming with me——"

"Let go of her," commanded a metallic voice.

LeGrand's hands fell away. He swung around.

Benny Darrell stood there. He was very pale. Flo backed off, frightened. She had seen him this way only once before—when a stage hand had insulted her. Afterward the stage hand had been carted off to a hospital. As Benny walked toward LeGrand Flo snatched up her evening wrap from the chair. The thought of a fight terrified her.

"Get out of my club," snarled LeGrand, shaking with rage.

Benny halted in front of him. "Get outa my wife's dressin' room!"

LeGrand was larger and heavier. With an oath, he suddenly swung a thick fist for Benny's chin.

But Benny's chin was not there. Earlier in his nomadic career Benny had once played in an act with a middle-weight champion, making a triumphal vaudeville tour. Benny and the champion's sparring partner had become pals. and from him Benny had

learned the rudiments of the manly art. As LeGrand swung, Benny ducked and brought his left up smartly against the big man's none too delicate nose.

With a scream Flo fled.

Benny danced away, the light of battle in his eye; and roaring like a bull LeGrand closed in on him. It was destined not to be much of a boxing match. LeGrand had the strength of a giant, impelled by an insane fury, and as he took a stinging jab on the mouth he caught Benny's coat lapel and swung him around, tearing the coat half off. Benny sprawled backward over a chair but was up in an instant, boring in on LeGrand with short, vicious punches. LeGrand, spitting blood, rushed at him, and once more knocked him reeling backward. This time Benny fell against a table, which overturned with a shattering of glass.

As Benny struggled to his feet, and came at him again, a waiter ran in, followed by another waiter.

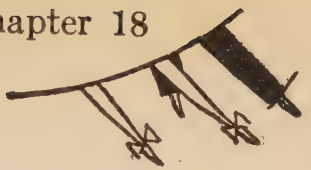
"Otto!" gasped LeGrand. "Get—my gun! He—attacked me!"

One of the waiters disappeared. The other snatched up a light chair and started for Benny. Then Benny connected with LeGrand's chin—a lucky blow—And LeGrand crumpled to the floor. Crash! The chair struck the wall just above Benny's head. He dodged suddenly back against the wall, groped for the light switch, found it—and darkness blotted out the room. With a leap Benny gained the door and sprinted down the corridor. Ahead he saw another door. He staggered through it and out into Fifty-fourth Street. A great commotion rose behind him, but he ran on, bareheaded, dishevelled. A cruising taxi drew up at the curb. Benny wrenched open the door and crawled in.

"Where to?" the driver inquired, mildly amused.

"Anywhere," answered Benny. "Only—make it fast. There's a lotta squarehead waiters chasin' me—the cops'll think I run out without payin' my check!"

Chapter 18



ONE-THIRTY. Flo sat in the window of her suite at the Versailles, looking down upon the lights of Central Park. There were not many lights at this hour. She glanced at her wrist watch. Alec should be along very soon. He had said he would join her here the moment he could get away from his party. A supper table and a bottle of champagne in a silver bucket of ice were waiting.

Her heart was still fluttering from the unpleasant scene she had just gone through in her dressing room. It all seemed so unreal. That LeGrand should have behaved like such a swine. Could it be true, she asked herself, that LeGrand had meant his threat? And then Benny—what had happened to Benny?

Surely it was an unfortunate moment for this romantic supper *à deux*. And Winston's first visit to her rooms. Perhaps, though, everything would be for the best. If LeGrand *was* through with her, perhaps marrying Winston would be the safest solution of all her problems. She knew that he wanted to marry her. Her own sentiments toward him were somewhat confused. Perhaps she was not really *in love* with him. . . . And yet he was by all odds the most eligible husband anyone could have. Ambition whispered in her ear. . . .

A gentle knock upon her door. She walked across and opened it. Winston came in and, after closing the door, drew her to him.

"It isn't very nice," she pouted, "to kiss a lady while you've got your hat on!"

Winston flung his top-hat on the divan. "I couldn't wait to take it off," he laughed. And kissed her again.

Rather breathlessly Flo disengaged herself from his arms. "Supper is on that table," she said. "I ordered everything you like."

"I didn't eat any of that atrocious food at your club," he told her, seating her at the table. "We had our own liquor, fortunately. How I loathe night clubs."

"I hope the champagne's cold enough," Flo said.

"Haven't you any Scotch?"

"No." She was disappointed. "This is very good champagne."

"I never drink it after midnight."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do you mind giving *me* a glass?" Sometimes, she thought, he could be annoyingly selfish.

As they ate supper she recounted the unpleasant incident in her dressing room. He seemed incredulous.

"You mean that swine LeGrand actually told you you were *fired?*"

"Of course, the whole thing is ridiculous," she said. "Any one of a dozen night clubs would feature me if I gave them the chance."

"Mm." He doubted this, though he did not say so. "Well, anyway, my dear, LeGrand's loss is my gain."

He was going to ask her to be his wife! She lowered her eyes demurely, and one polished finger nail played over the jewels in the bracelet he had given her.

Winston rose and sauntered across to the divan and flung himself down. "Come over here by me," he said.

With a proper show of reluctance she went over and sat beside him.

"Nice quarters you have here." He glanced around the apple-green and orchid room. Then he turned to her and his eyes twinkled. "Will you please tell me why the devil you've refused to let me come up before?"

"Well—I thought——"

"You're the damnedest puritan I've ever known!"

Abruptly he took her in his arms. The violence of his kiss disturbed her. She freed herself and sat up, smoothing her hair.

"Please, Alec——"

"What's the matter?"

"I—I feel rather nervous to-night."

"Sorry." He lighted a cigarette. "I thought this cozy little supper was to be——" He did not finish the sentence.

"Was to be—what, Alec?"

"Look here," he said, "now that your dancing is finished—for the moment, at least—there's nothing to keep you in New York, is there?"

"Why—I don't suppose so," she answered uncertainly.

"Then what do you say we throw our trunks aboard a *paquebot* and sail for one of the more secluded spots, famed in song and story?"

"The Riviera's nice." Her eyes were still lowered. "And the Orient."

"Somewhere east of Suez, where there

are no house detectives and a man can raise a thirst. Or a beard, if necessary." He smiled at her lazily through the smoke of his cigarette. "There are dozens of romantic honeymoon places. What do you say?"

She felt strangely calm. For weeks she had anticipated this moment, yet now that it had come she felt no particular thrill at the prospect of becoming Mrs. Alexander Winston.

"It sounds—very nice," she said quietly.

"Good!" he exclaimed, clasping her hand. "I always knew you weren't such a vestal as you pretended. How soon can you be ready? There's a boat sailing Tuesday."

"Oh, but the divorce! It would take at least six months in Reno. Or did you mean," she asked, "that I should get it in Paris?"

"I hadn't thought of it at all. You can get a divorce any time."

"But we can't be married till I *do* get it."

"Married?" Winston's eyebrows lifted.

"Why, certainly." Then she smiled. He was only teasing.

"But who said anything about *that?*"

"Well, didn't *you?*"

"Good Lord, no!" He grinned wryly. "Why in the world should anyone get into such a hopeless entanglement as marriage? It's so inconvenient to get out of. Look at yourself, now. You've got to go to all the bother of a divorce, and——"

"*Alec!*" She was quite pale. "You weren't suggesting that I—that we—would go abroad together *without* being married?"

"And why not?" he demanded. "After all, we're both civilized persons."

"I'm afraid I'm not *that* civilized." She stood up, and her eyes were angry.

"Oh, come now," he reached for her hand. She snatched it away.

"I don't know what I've ever done to make you think you could say such a thing to me!"

"Are we living in 1928—or in the days of good Queen Victoria? You know your way around—you're no schoolgirl!"

Her cheeks were flushed angrily. "Please don't say any more. I wish you'd go."

"For heaven's sake," said he, "don't behave like a peasant."

Peasant! The word cut her like a whip lash. That was what she had called Benny! She began to cry, miserably.

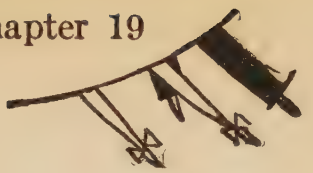
"Oh, my God!" sighed Winston. And gathered up his hat and coat.

Swiftly Flo unclasped the diamond-and-sapphire bracelet he had given her and dropped it on the table. With a shrug Winston put it in his pocket.

"Please go." She lifted her head with a gesture that in a motion picture would have indicated regal disdain. "I never wish to see you again."

"I shall see that you get your wish," murmured Winston. And departed.

Chapter 19



BENNY rang the bell at the Eliots' little white marble house in East 65th Street. It was the next afternoon, and a perfect October day, burnished with sunshine. Benny was wearing his best blue suit and a new derby hat. If you had not known who he was you might have mistaken him for

any nice young man who had, perhaps, just come from lunching at the Colony restaurant.

The manservant who admitted him, however, knew who he was. He conducted him at once to the small library, where Rita and her father entertained their intimate friends. It was a pleasant room, lined with books that looked as if somebody had read them, and the chairs were comfortable, and covered in red leather, not too new. Tall windows let in the afternoon sun. Benny liked this room. It was friendly.

Rita Eliot came in then, dressed for the street, and carrying a silver fox over her arm. "Speaking of angels," she said, giving him her hand with a bright smile, "I had just this minute telephoned you at your hotel. I've an invitation for you. Henry Henry is to have his brother's yacht for November. You know his brother is a nut on yachting, and the *Nirvana* is only about a size smaller than the *Leviathan*. Will you come?"

"Say," Benny told her, "the nearest I

ever came to a yacht cruise was a one-way trip on the Albany night boat."

"We can't guarantee such an interesting crowd as that," said she, "but I promise you there'll be none of what you call shirt fronts. Maggie and I are asking the people. Henry wants to cruise down around Bermuda—it's a bit early for Florida."

"Bermuda," mused Benny. "Ya remember my friend Lew Lewis—the song writer?"

"I shall never forget him!"

"Well, Lew wrote a song once—the title of it was: 'Take Me Back to Old Bermuda Where the Onions Bloom.'"

"I adore that," laughed Rita.

"The chorus went something like this." And reminiscently Benny sang:

"'*When it's onion time in old Bermuda*
I'm strong for you——'"

"I think we should take Mr. Lewis, too. They might make him poet laureate of the place."

"Lew couldn't leave Broadway. He thinks he's gotta be on duty there every day or

the lights wouldn't go on. He ain't been off Broadway but once in his life, an' then he only went as far as Harlem for overnight—an' almost died from homesickness."

"You must bring him to see me very soon," Rita said. "And what do you say about the cruise?"

"Gee, it's mighty nice of ya t' ask me." He looked down at his shoes. "I don't know where I'll be in November."

"Well, I do hope you'll come if you've nothing better to do."

"I s'pose I'll hafta go t' work one of these days. The public forget ya if ya're out if it for over two weeks."

"If you don't mind my saying so, I think you'll be happier working."

"There ain't a cabin in the Ozark Mountains as lonesome as a single room in a New York hotel," he answered. His brief gayety seemed suddenly to have evaporated. He looked up and smiled wistfully. "I wanta tell ya how—how *regular* that was of ya, night before last, when ya came t' my room."

"It was nothing at all," said Rita frankly.

"I simply dashed over there because I thought you were too decent to be let in for anything like that. It was quixotic of you—but no woman is worth it."

"Well . . ." he stirred uneasily. "I appreciate what ya did."

"If there are divorces to be had—Reno is the place for them."

"Yeh?" he looked at her intently. Yet he did not see her.

"It's a bit more expensive, but at least there are no detectives cluttering up the landscape."

"Say!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I'm keepin' ya—ya were just goin' out some place——"

"Only to a meeting of the board of my pet charity." She drew on her gloves. "It's at the Plaza. Will you walk down with me?"

They walked down the Avenue in the brilliant October sunshine, and it seemed to Benny that all the handsome well-dressed persons they met spoke to this lovely girl at his side. And of a sudden, as they walked,

she said, without looking at him: "You love her very much, don't you?"

And Benny answered huskily: "Yeh—I guess I do."

"Then there's only one thing for you to do—go back to her or forget her."

"Maybe it's too late t' do either," he said.

"In that case," she advised, with a brittle laugh, "I think you'd best come with us to Bermuda, where the onions bloom!"

At the Plaza she gave him her hand and her most charming smile. "Promise me that whenever you're lonely you'll come round and see us."

"Listen," he said, and his fine eyes were very grave. "D'ya wanta know what I think about you? I think ya're the greatest guy I ever met!"

*

As he walked into the lobby of his hotel the plump clerk, the red-haired telephone operator, and Leo, the conversational bell-boy, all greeted him with enthusiasm. Well, it was good to have friends. He knew that few men in New York possessed such a

loyal friend as Rita Eliot—and yet New York seemed to him as empty as the deserted village. . . .

Lew Lewis was waiting for him. On their way up in the elevator Lew appeared strangely ill at ease. His old brusque Broadway manner was gone. In Benny's room he shut the door almost furtively.

"Say," remarked Benny, "what's the matter with ya? Ya look like a guy that's about to break down an' confess t' the police where he hid the body."

"Worse," said Lew.

"Aintcha feelin' well?"

The song writer shook his head dolefully.

"Ya been t' the doctor?" Benny was solicitous.

"That wouldn't do no good."

"Is it your stummick?"

"Something wrong with my head," groaned Lew. "I'm gonna get married!" And he sank into a chair dejectedly.

"No! Honest?"

"Don't say it!" Lew waved him away. "I know I'm crazy."

"Crazy!" Benny wrung his hand. "It's the only wise thing ya ever done! Say, I'm tickled t'death—no kidding, I am!"

Even Salomy appeared excited, and capered around Lew, wagging her curly comma of a tail.

"Whatta ya know about that!" Benny exclaimed several times. "*You* gettin' *married!* Well, at that, old kid, Peggy's a lucky girl."

"That's what I been tellin' her," said Lew.

"The joke of the whole thing"—Benny laughed suddenly—"is that ya never would leave Broadway even for an afternoon. An' now ya *gotta* go away. Ya can't spend your honeymoon in the Astor grill!"

"She told me," said Lew, "that it was a shame if I went t' my grave without seein' something of my country besides Times Square. I says I wasn't exactly thinkin' of goin' t' my grave—I was just goin' t' the Little Church Around the Corner—an' comin' right out again. But I couldn't get

her off the idea, so finally I gave in, an' we're goin' outa town on our weddin' trip."

"Yeh?" said Benny. "Where?"

"Brooklyn," said Lew.

After a time he got up to go, and Benny was surprised to see him take a roll of bills from his pocket and toss it on the table.

"What's that?" Benny asked.

"Trading stamps," answered Lew. "I thought ya might want a pair of boxin' gloves or a silver-handled umbrella, maybe."

"Tell me when t' laugh," said Benny.

"No—it belongs t' ya."

"I wish it did." Benny grinned and picked up the money. "I could use it just now."

"It's yours." Lew was very serious. "On the level. Maybe ya don't remember—a good many years ago—one time ya staked me t' a hundred bucks when I needed it bad?"

"I don't remember." Benny looked puzzled.

"*I* do. It was that year I was poundin' the pianna over at the old Elite Beer Garden—remember?—an' you was hoofin' in

the floor show? Well, I never paid ya back. An' if the interest had collected, it would be that much."

"No, ya don't!" Benny shoved the bills toward him.

"Nix," said Lew. "It's yours. Don't argue with me—I got troubles enough!" As he went out he called over his shoulder: "Little Church Around the Corner—tomorrow afternoon at three. Ya gotta be the principal mourner. Kindly omit flowers." And he slammed the door.

Benny stood looking at the roll of bills. That was like old Lew. The story of the ancient loan was pure fiction. Lew knew that he was down to his last few dollars. Suddenly Benny stuffed the money into his pocket and picked up Salomy's harness and leash.

"Come on, kid," he said to the bull pup, "we're goin' for a walk. It's such a nice day on the Avenoo, ya might meet some dogs ya know!"

Chapter 20

AND that," said Lady Margaret Thrace, "is why I've stayed away. You wanted the truth, and we British are a brutal race."

Flo sat in the window seat of her "reception room" at the Hotel Versailles. All about her were strewn open trunks, traveling cases, hat boxes, dresses, shoes, hats, newspapers, telegrams, and bills, bills, bills.

She had been crying, but her eyes were dry now—and very thoughtful.

"Yes, I wanted you to tell me," she said in a small voice.

"I never cared for that unpoetical figure about the silk purse and the female pig's ear," continued Lady Margaret. "I prefer to think of it in another way: a robin can't become a bird of paradise merely by borrowing a few feathers. And as a matter of fact, most of us, I believe, prefer robins."

"I guess I've been a fool," Flo murmured.

"You have, my dear. I tell you so quite frankly. You could have had anyone in New York for your friend—if you had been content to remain your own sweet self. But you were trying desperately to be something you weren't. Benny, on the contrary, was always just himself—and everybody adored him."

"And I was afraid people considered him vulgar."

"The only really annoying vulgarity in the world," Lady Margaret told her, "is pretense. I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings."

"No—I deserve it," said Flo.

"You were due for a sound bump, but I'm sorry everything happened at once like this. It is distressing. Though I daresay that's the only way we ever come into wisdom. Have you any plans?"

Flo shook her head.

"I shouldn't feel at all bad about Alec. Half the women in New York have found him out—and he isn't yet thirty-five. Extraordinary how the fellow gets about."

"I'm not even thinking of him."

"Benny—well, I *am* sorry about that. You might have been very happy together. But it's so often that way, isn't it?—we never realize how sweet a summer has been until the autumn winds blow. My word!" she broke off suddenly, "I sound like a song by Carrie Jacobs Bond!" She gathered up her gloves and handbag. "Well, I must be going. I didn't come here to give you a sermon."

"I'm glad you did, Lady Margaret." Flo looked up wistfully.

Lady Margaret arose. "You must come

and see me when I get back to town. I'm going up to Tuxedo to do over Charley Quarrier's house. He married an English girl, you know—Bargrave's daughter—Lady Amabel Gaythorn, she was. Her grandfather, the old Earl, was my father's best friend. And in November I'm going on a cruise in Pelham Henry's yacht—as a matter of fact, Benny's going along, too. It's really Rita Eliot's party."

Flo's blue eyes opened wider, but she said nothing.

"I shall be back in town before Christmas," Lady Margaret said. "Will you be staying on here?"

"No, I—I don't think so. I can't afford it." It was the new Flo speaking: the old Flo would never have made such a confession.

"Well"—Lady Margaret gave her a friendly handshake—"I wish you the best of luck, my dear."

After she had gone, Flo slipped to her knees once more among the disorderly piles of dresses, shoes, and hats. She had to

do her own packing, now. Her maid had left that morning, threatening a lawsuit over two weeks' unpaid wages. Flo had no money. No money at all. She had expected that LeGrand would advance funds to meet her current bills, but he had craftily waited till the opening of the new club—and then—last night's catastrophe. Flo could not yet realize that it had happened. But the newspapers, crumpled there on the floor, told the story, and it was sensational Broadway news. LeGrand announced the closing of the Club Fleurette on the day after its opening. No reason given.

And now, here she was, with a monstrous three weeks' hotel bill; her car being held at the garage; the chauffeur unpaid—and nasty about it. Not to mention these sheafs of bills for dresses, hats—a thousand and one things.

Yesterday she had been the great Fleurette Sloane. To-day she was just a frightened girl, terribly alone. Three or four times she had stepped to the telephone to call Hummel, the booking agent. But each time she

had turned away. She knew how useless it would be to try to find another job just now. No matter how big a star you were, nobody wanted to hire a flop. And the wise ones along Broadway knew that she had been a flop last night. . . .

Wearily she began to pack the wardrobe trunk nearest her. But her mind was not on the dresses and hats and shoes. She was thinking of Benny. So, after all, those people whose social eminence she worshiped had taken Benny to their hearts. They had passed her by, but they had invited Benny into their homes and aboard their yachts. Lady Margaret was right. Be yourself—that was the only way. But in learning that bitter lesson, she had lost Benny.

As she dumped out the contents of a trunk tray, some old photographs fell at her feet. She picked one of them up: a faded snapshot of herself and Benny and Salomy, taken the first year they were married. Benny was wearing an atrocious checked suit, and had one arm around her and was smiling that at-

tractive smile of his. Flo's eyes felt suddenly hot, and her lower lip quivered. Another minute—and she would have been crying. But something happened just then. A knock at the door.

Flo brushed a tear from her eyes. The door opened, and Benny stood there, holding Salomy on the leash. The little dog's ears rose and she trembled with excitement, whining softly. Benny bent over and unsnapped the catch on the leash. With a frantic bound Salomy reached her mistress, and her mistress gathered her into her arms. She was crying now.

Benny felt very ill at ease. He was sorry that he had come. He looked down uncomfortably at the hat in his hands. "I—I didn't meant t' bust in here this way," he faltered. "But I didn't dare 'phone up from downstairs—I didn't think ya'd see me."

Flo sobbed gently, holding the dog close in her arms.

"I won't bother ya but a minute." He fumbled in his pocket and brought out the

roll of bills and laid it on the ridiculous hotel desk beside him. "I was thinkin' ya might need this."

Flo shook her head. "I—I can't take it."

"It's 't go out t' Reno with," he said. "Ya can get divorces better out there."

Flo's weeping rose in intensity.

Benny had always hated to see her cry. It reduced him to a state of abject misery. He took a helpless step toward her. "Is—is there anything besides money that worries ya—I mean——"

"Money!" she sobbed. "I don't care about that."

"Tell me," he pleaded. "Is there anything I can do?"

She could not answer. He frowned. "If it's that fella, Winston——"

"*No!*" she cried vehemently. "I never want to see him again—never!"

"Well—what *do* ya want?"

And Flo, through a shower of tears, wailed: "I w-want my husband!"

"Who—*me?*" For several seconds he stared, incredulous. Then, dropping his new

hat, he flung himself down and attempted to compass both Flo and the dog in his arms.

Ten minutes later he deposited a starry-eyed Flo on the divan and, walking over to the telephone, called the office of B. B. Hummel. The booking agent himself answered.

"Remember that offer ya told me about the other day?" said Benny.

And over the wire Hummel's voice replied: "Sure I do—twenty weeks of the big time at fifteen hundred a week. Am I right?"

"Is that offer still open?"

"Any day ya'll sign on the dotted line, Benny. But what about a partner?"

"Oh, I got a partner," Benny answered.

"Yeh? Can she dance?"

"She's the best there is."

"What's her name?"

"The name of the act," Benny told him, with a great smile at Flo, "is Darrell and Sloane."

"*What!*" he heard the booking agent yelp joyously. "Flo? She's back with ya again?

Why, say—the Office'll pay ya two thousand a week!"

"When do we open?" Benny asked him.

And Hummel answered: "Next Monday ain't soon enough!"

Flo came over, then, and interrupted this business conversation by putting her arms around Benny and drawing his face down to hers.

"Do you know something?" Her blue eyes smiled happily. "You're the grandest man in the world!"

And Benny said: "Who—me?"

THE END

HOUSE
SQUIBB'S
CAMEL
RUGS
ATTRACTION
PALACE

SENSATIONAL
APPEARANC
DARREL
AND
SLOANE
The in
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in town !!
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TOT